

Worship: An Exercise in Revisioning¹

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by

Alton C. Thompson

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Introduction

Dictionaries, in defining “worship,” use such abstract words as “reverence,” “devotion,” “homage,” “veneration,” “adoration,” “glorification,” and “praise.” Thereby, they do little to enlighten us as to what “worship” means in *concrete* terms to the average American. If, therefore, one is desirous of obtaining a meaningful conception of how one’s fellow Americans conceive “worship,” one will need to observe them, and then make inferences regarding the contents of the meaning that they assign to the word. With my own use of this approach to the clarification of the meaning of “worship,” I conclude that the typical American conceives “worship” as:

- Involving certain specific types of activities;
- That occur in churches (i.e., buildings);²
- On Sunday mornings (only, usually);
- During “worship services;”
- These having a retrospective orientation; and
- Having the purpose of expressing praise and thanks to God for what He (it is claimed) did for congregants (and/or others) in the recent past.

A scientific study by, e.g., a sociologist³ of what “worship” means, in practice, to the typical American would, I assume, produce a much more complex picture of the meaning of “worship” in America. The above characterization *does*, however, have a basis in fact, and has a basic validity for the typical American at least, I believe.

Given this conventional concept of worship, a lectionary passage read (and commented upon by the presiding clergy member) to many of us on August 12, 2007, was rather disturbing (at least potentially), for it challenged that conventional concept of “worship.” Indeed, this passage

²Those activities may also occur in a studio from which a “church service” is broadcast over the radio or television. Commonly, however, church services that are broadcast emanate from a church building.

³Robert N. Bellah, for example, author (with others) of *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985.

suggested that the conventional concept of worship is not only basically wrong, but *grossly* wrong—for it implied that the *Biblical* concept of “worship” is the virtual *exact opposite* of the commonly-accepted one! Ironically, then, a Biblical passage that in effect “convicted” Christian churches for their failure to promote worship in a Biblical sense was read, and commented upon, in many Christian churches on August 12, 2007!

What was the passage in question? It was drawn from Isaiah 1, a part of which reads as follows:

(10) . . . Pay attention to what our God is teaching you. (11) He says, “Do you think I want all these sacrifices you keep offering me? I have had more than enough of the sheep you burn as sacrifices and of the fat of your fine animals. I am tired of the blood of bulls and sheep and goats. (12) Who asked you to bring me all this when you come to worship me? Who asked you to do all this tramping around in my Temple? (13) It’s useless to bring your offerings. I am disgusted with the smell of the incense you burn. I cannot stand your New Moon Festivals, your Sabbaths, and your religious gatherings; they are all corrupted by your sins. (14) I hate your New Moon Festivals and holy days; they are a burden that I am tired of bearing. (15) When you lift your hands in prayer, I will not look at you. No matter how much you pray, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with blood. (16) Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil (17) and learn to do right. See that justice is done—help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows.”⁴

I don’t recall whether the word “worship” occurred in the translation used by the pastor whose reading I heard—a fact with some degree of significance, in that in some translations of this passage the word “worship” is not used. But whether or not the translation used by the pastor included the word “worship,” what he emphasized concerning the passage is that *that’s* what it’s about.⁵ The passage begins, he noted, by describing how worship was commonly understood centuries ago—as involving such activities as sacrifices and other offerings, the burning of incense, festivals, and prayer. Then, he continued, the passage contrasts conventional notions of what worship should entail with *God’s* view of the matter, as interpreted by the prophet.

⁴Isaiah 1:10 - 17, *Good News Bible*. New York: American Bible Society, 1976. I have added parentheses to set off the verse numbers. All subsequent references to the Bible come from this version.

⁵Although the pastor did not point out this fact, the Isaiah passage quoted above has a number of parallels in other parts of the Bible: Deuteronomy 10:12; I Samuel 15:22; Psalm 40:6 - 8, 51:16, and 82:3; Amos 5:21, 22; Micah 6:6 - 8; Jeremiah 6:20, 22:3; and Hosea 6:6. In addition, this concept of worship is implicit in many other passages. For example, one can argue that it is implicit in the famous Good Samaritan parable attributed to Jesus in Luke 10:25 - 37.

That concept of worship, notice, is a purely *ethical* concept. Indeed, what's of interest regarding the concept is that it makes only passing reference to what one should *not* do; that is, it makes little reference to *sin*—and, in fact, does not even identify any specific sins. Rather, the concept of worship embedded in this passage focuses on sorts of actions that one *should* do: it refers to the general principle of doing “right,” and then adds some specific examples (helping the oppressed, giving orphans their rights, and defending widows). Put another way, *God's* concept of “worship” is *service*—meaning, therefore, that “worship” and “service” are synonyms—so that “worship service” is simply a meaningless term (because redundant). Or, rather, is it a term we use to fool others—and ourselves—into believing that our church meetings on Sunday mornings *constitute* “worship” in a Biblical sense? (A rhetorical question, needless to say.)

Which reminds me of the fact that a number of years ago I attended, with a friend, a Quaker (i.e., Society of Friends) meeting. After the meeting, a woman with whom we were conversing apologized for the low attendance that day. She explained that about half of the members were involved in a protest march that morning. In looking back at that experience, it occurs to me that her explanation could have been phrased differently. She could—and should—have stated that half of the members were off *worshiping* in the community. And, therefore, she should have felt no need to apologize—quite the contrary, indeed.

The point is that “worship,” from a Biblical (and especially prophetic) standpoint, involves *activities*, but not the sorts of activities that *typically* occur on Sunday mornings within Christian “sanctuaries.”⁶ Rather, it involves activities of the sort that are referred to in the Isaiah passage. But did this message really “get through” to those who heard this Isaiah passage read, along with the commentary upon it? Surely the cleric reading the passage, and offering comments on it, at least realized the irony involved in his or her presentation that morning. And a few of the congregants may also have recognized the irony. But were either clergy or congregants jolted enough by the message offered that day to think through the implications?⁷ For the clergy

⁶Providing sanctuary from *what*, one might ask! From a knowledge of what worship actually entails?!!

⁷Likely not. One must keep in mind here that the Jesus movement strand from which Christianity arose turned its back on an orientation to the *orthopraxy* (i.e., concern for right *behavior*) of the Bible for *orthodoxy* (i.e., concern for correct *belief*). Indeed, a primary reason why this strand attracted “Gentiles” was that the theology it developed drew heavily upon pagan mythology, particularly that associated with the “Mysteries.” (See, e.g., the 30-point list of parallels in Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999, pp. 60 - 61.) Ironically, had not this “paganization” occurred, it's likely that *none* of the Jesus movements would have survived beyond the fifth century CE, and that Jesus would be only a footnote in some history books. (See Charles Guignebert, *The Christ*. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1968, p. 110. Translated by Peter Ouzts and Phyllis Cooperman; edited and revised by Sonia Volochova. Originally published—

involved, did they ask what implications this might have for how religious meetings should be designed? And for the congregants, did they perceive what implications the words they had just heard should have on their conduct during the days ahead? Also, were the congregants encouraged to ask: “Given the activities that I will be involved in this coming week—things I *must* do such as traveling to and from work, working at a job, preparing meals, taking care of my children, going shopping, visiting the dentist/doctor, along with activities that I do during my “free” time—how *helpful* have the activities that occurred during the church meeting that I just attended been for enabling me to engage in worship activities during the coming week?”

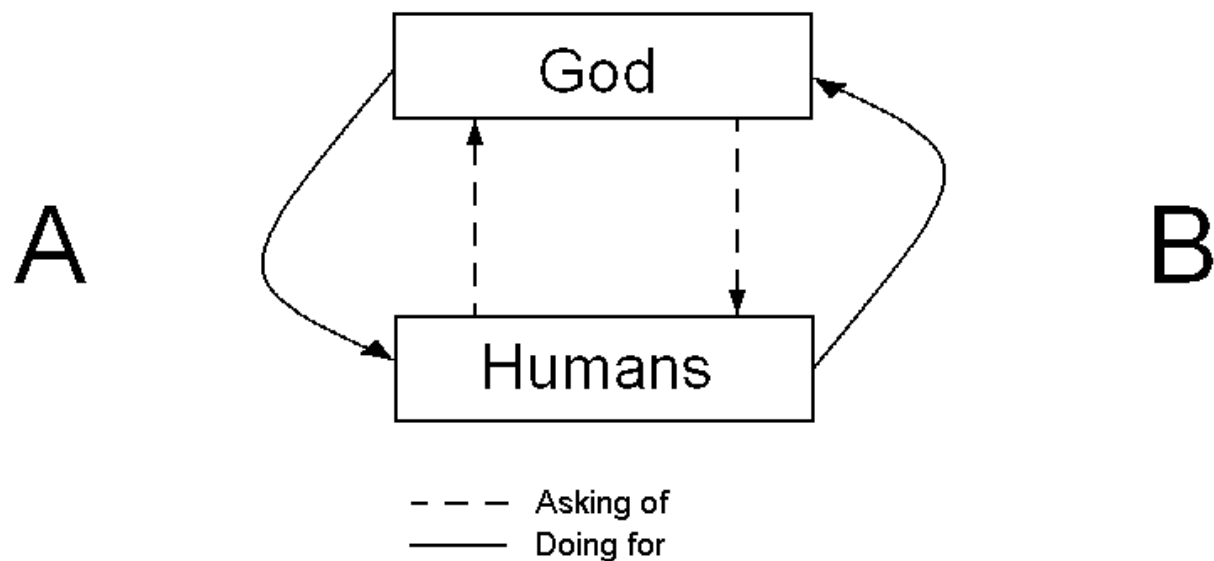
Worship, then, involves *activities*, but the sorts of activities specified in the Isaiah passage, not those typically associated with “worship services”—a damning comment to make on Christianity as a religion, to be sure! Granted that protest marches—activities that Quakers are “notorious” for engaging in—are not mentioned in the Isaiah passage, but does it follow from *that* fact that protest marches (some of them at least) cannot be considered to be *worship* activities? Another question that arises from our discussion here is: If Sunday morning meetings at churches do not involve worship in a Biblical sense (which they don’t!), does this mean that they should be abandoned?!

posthumously—in French in 1943.)

The reason I say “likely not” is that Christianity has long been in the grip of orthodoxy—each denomination having its own particular orthodoxy, of course—and that therefore most Christians have difficulty thinking outside that “box.” Indeed, many Christians have such a psychological investment in their particular orthodoxy that they are severely disturbed when they encounter views that are discordant with that orthodoxy—to the point that they viciously attack (including physically) the “heretics” who dare think differently. Yet they still call themselves disciples of Jesus!

The above discussion/questions leads me to identify the four questions that I wish to address in this essay, but first let me contrast the conventional concept of “worship” with the Biblical one, using a graphic (above). This figure shows two ways that humans can relate to God. With the “A” way one’s orientation is to God doing for humans, with humans receiving from God, often in response to petitions made to God. With the “B” way one’s orientation is the *inverse* of this—doing for God, with humans receiving revelations and inspiration from God (not necessarily in response to petitions directed to God).

Conventional “worship services” typically involve elements of both orientations, but with an emphasis on the first. Therefore, they in effect primarily involve a “God-as-cosmic-bellhop” concept of God (as someone has put it). Paradoxically, although a blasphemous, or near blasphemous, concept of God is therefore associated with the “A” orientation, those who have this orientation are commonly perceived as the truly pious members of our society! Although



“worship” in a Biblical sense is only associated with the “B” orientation, this orientation is not strongly associated with most Christian churches. “Lip service” is, not infrequently, given to the “B” orientation, but that orientation is not firmly embedded within Christianity—giving, thereby, Christianity a rather strange (and strained) relationship with the Christian Bible. Indeed, one might say that insofar as Christians use the Bible, they typically do so to support their biases, rather than paying heed to the Bible’s basic thrust.⁸

⁸Historian Thomas L. Thompson has stated that “the biblical texts are not, for the most part, religious texts themselves. They are rather philosophical critiques of religious tradition and practice.” And: “A substantial core of Christian theology has preferred literalism and historicism to metaphor, and [therefore] stands opposed to its biblical substance [i.e., misses the point of the Bible!].” *The Mythic*

Needless to say, the orientation that guides the presentation that follows is the “B” one, a fact for which I offer no apologies. As to the specific questions addressed in the pages that follow, they are:

- Must we use a “strict constructionist” approach in defining “worship”? That is, must we restrict our definition of worship activities to those referred to in the Isaiah passage? Does not the Bible—in other passages—provide us with a basis for conceiving “worship” more broadly (so that, e.g., properly-conducted protest marches can be considered a form of worship)? It is true that we can use our rational minds to arrive at a less constrictive concept of “worship,” but does not the Bible itself give us a basis for doing so?
- Is it *necessary* for those who wish to worship in the Biblical sense to meet on a regular basis with like-minded others? Cannot one be an isolate⁹ and still engage in worship activities?
- Even if it is not necessary, is it, though, *advantageous* for those who wish to adopt a worship orientation, and who live in the same general vicinity, to meet on a regular basis? That is, is it not conceivable that their meeting with like-minded others would help them become more *effective* worshipers?¹⁰
- Assuming a group of individuals, all of whom would like to develop a worship orientation, and who wish to meet with one another on a regular basis, *how* should they structure their meetings? Is the conventional structure associated with the mainline churches adequate given their intentions, or would some other structure “work” better?

The two questions that I wish to focus on herein are the first and fourth, and at this point will “dispose” of the other two questions in short order—and then close my introductory remarks with a few other comments. First, as to the second question: Of course it is possible for one to be a “lone ranger” type of worshiper, simply acting as an individual.¹¹ Indeed, the personalities of some individuals are such that they are relatively self-sufficient from an emotional standpoint, and do not feel a strong need to socialize with others. It does not follow, however, that such

Past: Biblical Archeology and the Myth of Israel. New York: Basic Books, 1999, pp. 387 and 394.

⁹I mean by this one who acts as an individual rather than as a member of a group.

¹⁰In this day of communication via conference calls and the internet there is the possibility of interacting with others on a basis other than face-to-face. However, I eschew reference to such possibilities in the pages that follow.

¹¹Indeed, although we can say that only *some* of us are always “lone ranger” worshipers, those who wish to meet on a regular basis with like-minded others are of two categories: those who prefer to act alone, and those whose preference is to act in concert with like-minded others.

people are necessarily self-centered; it is entirely conceivable that some such people have a strong social conscience that motivates them to want to engage in worship activities—and enables them to be very effective in doing so as “loners.” If some of those in our midst drawn to worship activities have a preference to plan and act alone, they should not be criticized for that fact. Rather, they should be left alone—and perhaps even encouraged.

I suspect that most people desirous of adopting a worship orientation would, however, prefer to meet with like-minded others on a regular basis—for the simple reason that most people feel a need to interact with their fellows, and are especially desirous of interacting with *like-minded* others. Indeed, our very humanity is only in part genetic in origin: without care from other humans upon birth, most would not even survive—and those few who do, do not become recognizably human.

Why would it be *advantageous*, for those desirous of becoming oriented to a life within which worship plays a prominent role, to meet, on a regular basis, with like-minded others? A more detailed answer to this question is given later, but at this point I can mention that such meeting can provide an opportunity to share one’s worship ideas with others, and to learn of others’ worship idea—this helping to “recharge one’s batteries” for the week ahead. Plus, it can result in ideas for collective efforts, joint planning for the implementation of such efforts, followed by working together with others in their actual implementation—these various activities helping create feelings of solidarity/community within the group. Other potential benefits are identified in Section B below, but at this point I simply wish to indicate that there *are* potential benefits in like-minded people meeting on a regular basis (whether the purpose of such meetings is worship or something else).

However, a point that I wish to emphasize herein is that the potential benefits associated with like-minded people meeting on a regular basis will only be realized if the meetings *themselves* are *structure*—i.e., designed properly. The conventional Christian religious service involves, e.g., a member of the clergy reading from Scripture to congregants, administering various sacraments to them, and delivering a sermon/homily to them. Is such a “meeting design” conducive to the promotion of worship activities, during the days ahead, on the part of those attending? My answer is that it is not—and that this is also true of the so-called “contemporary service”: it tends to be no more oriented to worship in a Biblical sense than is the conventional “service”! Because I have little faith in the design of the conventional religious meeting, in Section B below I offer an alternate design—after first specifying a series of design principles.

The final point that I would like to make in these introductory remarks is that the Isaiah passage (much of the Bible, indeed) ostensibly is addressed to a society’s “haves,” so that it seemingly suggests that only “haves” can—and need to—engage in worship activities; and that, further, a

meeting established for those interested in dedicating a part of their life to worship activities would be open only to “haves.” It is true that many, if not most, of the directives contained in the Bible were/are primarily intended for a society’s “haves.” We must keep in mind, however, the words of Paul:

*There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to everyone for their particular service. The Spirit’s presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all.*¹²

Everyone—“haves” and “have nots” alike—has abilities, there being *qualitative* differences among us in what those abilities are. Our society likes to emphasize *quantitative* differences, of course, but where *worship* activities are involved, we should not carry over our habit of thinking in quantitative terms—in part because it is impossible to know the future effects of worship actions. More importantly, however, those with a true worship orientation will think it contradictory to that orientation to apply quantitative thinking to their worship activities. Consequently, meetings involving those desirous of further developing an orientation to worship activities may very well include the rich and the poor, the black and the white, the professional and the laborer, the educated and the school dropout, the female and the male, the “believer” and the non-believer, the straight and the gay, etc., etc. It goes without saying that worship and hatred of one’s fellows are incompatible. A meeting established for those with an orientation to worship activities *must* be open to all those having—or desiring further to acquire—that orientation.

The first and fourth questions identified above require more attention than was given above to the second and third questions, and Sections A and B below address those questions. Section A “mines” the Christian Bible, searching for discussions of worship that parallel the Isaiah passage quoted earlier, but broaden that concept of worship. Section B then identifies design principles for meetings having as their purpose helping attendees prepare themselves for worship activities. It does not apply those principles to the conventional “worship service”—or even “contemporary service,” for that matter—leaving such application to the reader. Rather, the focus of Section B is the presentation of a new sort of design for religious meetings—specifically ones for individuals desirous of acquiring a “B” sort of orientation (to allude to the figure presented earlier). That section not only describes the salient features of the new type of meeting, but identifies the principles to be used in conducting meetings, and indicates the sorts of “outcomes” expected for attendees—both as individuals, and as a group.

¹²I Corinthians 12:4 - 7.

I. Worship in the Bible

The Bible is a complex book. It contains numerous literary genres. And numerous perspectives have been expressed regarding what the Bible is Aabout.” For example, in a single book (!) we find these “summaries” of the Bible:¹³

- “It [the Bible] is the account of a faithless people and a faithful God who seek constantly to renew their relationship each with the other.”
- “If the Bible were just about the successful and the pious it would be little more than a collection of Horatio Alger tales or Barbara Cartland romances. It could aspire at best to the status of *Aesop’s Fables* or a Norse epic. What makes the Bible interesting and compelling is the company of humans beings who through its pages play their parts in the drama of the human and the divine.”
- “The Bible is an account of that great company of people who have both sought and found a way. We should take them seriously, for they have much to tell us.”
- “The Bible, if nothing else, is a book about the dangers of false trust.”
- “. . the Bible is about the formation of a fellowship, a community of men and women who are reminded over and over again that they are not alone, not on their own but part of a communion”
- “If the Bible is about anything, it is about the subtle, ruthless, remorseless persistence of evil.”
- “[. . the hypothetical book] *Why Good People Do Bad Things*.[¹⁴] That is what we have been talking about all along, and it is no small subject of the Bible as well.”
- “. . the Bible, if it is anything at all, is an essay in the genealogy of temptation.”
- “. . the Bible . . . is a book not about limits but about infinity, and visions, not history minus but poetry plus.”

¹³Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. New York: Avon Books, 1996, pp. 65, 185, 188, 191, 196, 246, 259, 267, 326, and 327.

¹⁴The allusion here is, of course, to Rabbi Harold Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

- “The Bible . . . is the record of those for whom mystery and meaning are not antithetical but a life’s work in the growing knowledge of self and of God.”

Despite the fact that the Bible lends itself to a variety of interpretations, I have developed a certain perspective on the Bible over the years, and it is that perspective which guides the discussion throughout this essay.¹⁵ My particular perspective on the Bible has especially been shaped by a book that I acquired in 1975, an old book by Theodore Gerald Soares.¹⁶ For what this book did for me was to help me conceive of the Bible as a record of sorts of a certain *tradition*; a tradition which—significantly—did not end with Bible times—a point that Soares made clear in his final chapter (XXXVII, “The Social Teachings of Jesus and the Prophets in the Modern World,” pp. 369 - 80). Given that that tradition (which I like to capitalize as Tradition) continued beyond Bible times, what Soares was in effect telling me was that I, as a reader of his book, should take his hint—to the effect that I (*any* reader, in fact) should be not just an *observer* and *student* of the Tradition, but should become a *part* of it—by *entering* it as a participant. One implication of this “suggestion” being, of course, that rather than striving to become a *disciple* of Jesus, one should, rather, strive to be *like* Jesus—in the sense of becoming (like Jesus) a *contributor* to the Tradition, one who is working to *continue*, and even *further develop*,¹⁷ the Tradition. Put another way, one should strive to be “authored” by the Tradition (to use a word associated with theologian Delwin Brown, who uses it in conjunction with the Bible).

How should that Tradition be characterized? No doubt it can be thought of in a variety of ways, but I think of it as including (but not necessarily being restricted to) ideas regarding what constitutes worship, plans to engage in worship, ideas concerning how to remove barriers to worship, and actions to implement those plans.

More recently, my perspective on the Bible has been strengthened by my reading of some works by historian Thomas L. Thompson. Besides the book by him cited earlier, and of even more relevance (for my presentation here), is Thompson’s recent *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David*.¹⁸ For Thompson detects, in the Bible, a tradition that

¹⁵Note that my interest (unlike Gomes’s) is not in *summarizing* the Bible but, rather, identifying and discussing passages that support, and expand upon, the Isaiah 1 passage quoted earlier.

¹⁶*The Social Institutions and Ideals of the Bible*. New York: The Abingdon Press, 1925. Originally published in 1915.

¹⁷It should be obvious that the members of the Tradition whose names we know are primarily individuals who were *innovators* in some sense.

¹⁸New York: Basic Books, 2005.

parallels rather closely the one that *I* perceive—and discusses it with an impressive level of sophistication.

Thompson argues (p. x) that “The Pentateuch [i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy] and the early Jewish biblical tradition present Samaritan and Jewish versions of an ancient Near Eastern understanding of the late first millennium BCE; the [canonical] gospels present and share this same intellectual and literary tradition in the Greco-Roman period of late Hellenism.” Although this statement does not indicate the *nature* of the tradition, it *does* make several assertions of interest:

- Members of a certain tradition¹⁹ produced the Pentateuch (and other parts of the “Old Testament”).
- This tradition was not only *not* unique to Judaism, but was a common one in the ancient Near East before Judaism ever existed. (Indeed, one can argue that the behaviors associated with the tradition are rooted in “human nature”—contrary to the claims²⁰ of the “original sin” crowd.²¹)

¹⁹Thompson refers to it as “the greater tradition” on, e.g., p. 35. He more commonly uses the phrase “The Song for a Poor Man” to refer to the tradition. This is the title of his Chapter 4 (pp. 107 - 35); Appendix I (pp. 323 - 35) is entitled “Examples of the Song for a Poor Man;” and the phrase also occurs on pp. 156, 186, 191, 192, 194, 212, 277, 299, and 305.

²⁰Claims, by the way, that have had horrific consequences. See, e.g., R. [ichard] C. Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon J. Kamin, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984; and Steven Rose, *Lifelines: Biology Beyond Determinism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

²¹See, e.g., *Good Natured: The Origin of Right and Wrong in Human and Other Animals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. Insofar as these behavioral tendencies are “natural” for humans, this would not be attributable to Darwinian “natural selection”—a concept which has little relevance for explaining real-world phenomena, contrary to what is often claimed—but, rather, to sexual selection. See, e.g., Nancy Makepeace Tanner, *On Becoming Human*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981. See especially pages 164, 165, and 210. I should add to my statement that the *Darwinian* concept of natural selection has little real-world explanatory value, that “natural selection” is given a variety of meanings, and part of the fault for this fact lies with Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* itself, with its “mushy” prose. Thus, when Robert Wright asked, “Why did natural selection give us that vast guilt repository known as conscience?,” it is not clear what specific meaning he was giving the term. (Wright, *The Moral Animal: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994, p. 5.) Finally, I should add that this Wright quotation serves to illustrate the point that many who use the term “natural selection” fail to indicate what specific meaning they are attaching to the term. That is, for too many writers, “natural selection” has been a mere mantra. See Francis Hitching, *The Neck of the Giraffe: Where Darwin Went Wrong*. New Haven, CT: Ticknor & Fields, 1982, p. 104.

- The canonical gospels are in that same tradition.²²

Whereas all of these points should be of interest to anyone concerned with “Bible history,” the point of particular note here (so far as I am concerned) is Thompson’s considered view that the canonical gospels should be regarded as *part of*—an *extension of*, in fact—a tradition that began centuries before they were written. A view, by the way, that prevents one from viewing the Old Testament as a book whose only interest to the Christian is that it (supposedly) makes numerous predictions (i.e., “prophecies”) regarding Jesus—a view of the “Old Testament” that I, a non-Jew, reject utterly.²³

A. The Law Portion

In identifying and commenting upon the specifics of the Tradition it is useful to begin with what would appear to be the earliest version of the Ten Commandments found in the Bible. What I am referring to here is the version that appears in Exodus 34:12 - 26 (identified in Exodus 34:28 thusly: “. . . the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments,” and preceded in v. 11 with these words: “Obey the laws that I am giving you [Moses directly] today. I will drive out the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, as you advance [toward the Promised Land].”):

1. Do not make any treaties with the people of the country into which you are going: this could be a fatal trap for you.
2. Tear down their altars, destroy their sacred pillars, and cut down their symbols of the goddess Asherah.
3. Do not worship any other god [for there *are* other gods].
4. Do not make any treaties with the people of the country [you are about to enter].
5. Do not make gods of metal and worship them.

²²I find it of interest that Thompson evidently does not regard Paul as having been a part of the Tradition: In his “Index of Biblical Citations” (pp. 381 - 96) he lists (p. 395) only I Corinthians 7:29, 30 and [I] Thessalonians 4:15 - 17. (He also lists Ephesians 5:26, but that book is generally regarded as inauthentic by scholars.) I must add here that although I have problems with Paul, I *do* see Paul as an important contributor to the tradition.

²³A more rational way to perceive so-called prophecies regarding Jesus in the Old Testament is to recognize that they were basically copied from the Old Testament and inserted into the New. See, e.g., Randel McCraw Helms's *Gospel Fictions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988) and *Who Wrote the Gospels?* (Altadena, CA: Millennium Press, 1997) for excellent discussions of the matter.

6. Keep the Festival of Unleavened Bread.
7. Every first-born son and first-born domestic animal belongs to me.
8. No one is to appear before me without an offering.
9. Do not work on the seventh day, not even during plowing time or harvest.
10. Keep the Harvest Festival, and the Festival of Shelters.
11. Three times a year all of your men must come to worship me.
12. Do not offer bread made with yeast when you sacrifice an animal to me.
13. Do not keep until the following morning any part of the animal killed at the Passover Festival.
14. Each year bring to the house of the LORD the first grain that you harvest.
15. Do not cook a young sheep or goat in its mother's milk.

Note here first that there are 14 “commandments” rather than 10 (given that 1 and 4 are virtually identical). And note, second, that although they are referred to as “commandments,” they are all better referred to as *regulations*,²⁴ with none of them being *laws*. (In contrast, in the version of the Ten Commandments²⁵ given in Exodus 20:1 - 17, 6 of the 10 are laws.)

Note also (the non-obvious—and also rather embarrassing—point) that to attribute commands to God is to perceive (if but implicitly) God as a king-like being. An important implication of *that* fact is that one thereby “admits” that God cannot *cause* people to engage (or refrain from engaging) in certain behaviors, but can only *order* them to. That is, God is not *omnipotent* (a Greek concept, and therefore one foreign to the Bible); and in not being omnipotent, God does not, then, have the *ability* to create the cosmos and its components! So that the God who, in Genesis, creates the cosmos *cannot* be the same God who in, e.g., Deuteronomy, issues

²⁴Most of which are cultic in nature; laws, in contrast, can be thought of as commands having an ethical content.

²⁵I find it interesting that many professing Christians place great stock in the Ten Commandments, not realizing, seemingly, that in a very real sense Paul's letters (his discussion of the Holy Spirit in particular) make those Commandments passé. For an interesting (if old) discussion of the Ten Commandments see “History and the Commandments” in (pp. 271 - 75) Louis Wallis, *The Bible is Human*. New York: AMS Press; a reprint of the 1942 edition published by Columbia University Press.

commands. It is true that the Bible contains evidence that the *henotheism* (i.e., the idea that gods are only tribal gods) of the early Hebrews gave way to *monotheism* (i.e., the idea that there is but *one* true God); there is, however, no need to resolve those two views of God because they are not in serious conflict).

The Bible does not, however, resolve the contradiction identified here regarding the *nature* of God—and has the Law-giving God somehow (without explanation) also be the Creator God. In a sense, the Bible “resolves” (or at least has been so interpreted) the conflict by making the claim that God created humans with “free will,” and therefore able to choose either good or evil. But this assertion—and its associated “explanation”—amounts to a “shifty sophistication”²⁶ in that it raises the question: If God had the ability to give humans free will, how is it that subsequently He lacked an ability to *withdraw* that “gift”—and then intervene in human affairs? And if He has continued to reveal truths to people (a type of intervention), how is *that* consistent with His decision not to intervene in a more direct way? Etc.

But these are theological issues that need not detain us here; besides, I lack talent in the field of intellectual contortionism! Let us get back to the matter at hand, and allow the theologians to wallow in their speculations regarding these esoteric matters—while there is still paid employment available to them!

To return to this “primitive” version of the “Ten Commandments”: Why their lack of ethical content? What I would hypothesize as the answer is that this version was created at a time in Hebrew history when the tribes were small enough to be extended families. As such, sharing would have occurred as a matter of course; and as a consequence, there would have been no *need* for ethical laws.²⁷ That is, *mores*—unwritten “laws”—existed in the society such that when neediness was observed, that neediness was automatically “ministered to” by fellow tribal

²⁶A phrase derived from this sentence: “. . . the courts, standing on a secure and familiar natural-rights footing, have commonly made short work of the shifty sophistications which trade-union advocates have offered for their consideration.” Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise*. Clifton, NJ: Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, 1973, p. 329. With prefatory note by Joseph Dorfman, and a review by James Hayden Tufts. Originally published by The Macmillan Company, 1904. This book is, along with most of Veblen’s other books, available online at <http://de.geocities.com/veblenite>.

²⁷For an excellent discussion of tribal societies see David Maybury-Lewis, *Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*. New York: Viking, 1992. A more comprehensive, if less sophisticated (and recent), book is Robin Clarke and Geoffrey Hindley, *The Challenge of the Primitives*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975. For an excellent “tribal” critique of American society see Kent Nerburn, *Neither Wolf Nor Dog: On Forgotten Roads With an Indian Elder*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 1994.

members able so to do (and this was done largely because humans, *qua* humans, are so “programmed.”). Because the mores of the tribe “prescribed” much of their behavior, members of the tribe had no need for laws as *we* know them (i.e., written rules of an ethical nature). As tribes expanded in size, however, not only did a breakdown of the mores occur; with their breakdown, people began to *neglect* those of their fellows with physical needs. Indeed, there even began the *exploitation*²⁸ of one’s fellows—thereby adding to whatever neediness already existed.²⁹ Because some of those with memories of the “old days” perceived (or was revelation involved here?) that their society was “going downhill,” they took matters into their own hands and initiated the Tradition. That is, they created a series of laws (these being subjected to editing over a long period of time), and attributed them to “God” to give them force—so that the laws would be followed (they hoped—vainly, as it turns out). Thus, the contribution of these initiators of the Tradition was not only to create ethical laws, but attribute them to God.³⁰

Why view the commands listed above as antecedent to the birth of the Tradition, given that they utterly lack in ethical content—i.e., are not in the least oriented to human well-being? Because they represent an attempt to influence the behavior of their fellows, and were attributed to God (as if God were a king-like Being³¹). In fact, one can argue that the *reason* they were attributed

²⁸Yes, Mr. Marx, exploitation didn’t begin with Capitalism. It just became more subtle. See, e.g., Chapter V (“*Das Kapital*,” pp. 91 - 129) in Michael Harrington, *Socialism*. New York: Bantam Books, 1973. Originally published by Saturday Review Press in 1972.

²⁹It is interesting to read I Samuel 8, wherein the “leaders of Israel” told Samuel that he was getting old, so that he should “appoint a king to rule over us . . .” Samuel was displeased with this request, and in praying to the LORD was told “I am the one they have rejected as their king.” The LORD then told Samuel to “listen to them, but give them strict warnings and explain how their kings will treat them.” Samuel then took the LORD’s advice, and proceeded to list all of the disadvantages of having a king—e.g., “He will take a tenth of your flocks. And you yourselves will become his slaves.” But the people “paid no attention to Samuel, but said “No! We want a king, so that we will be like other nations, with our own king to rule us and lead us out to war and to fight our battles.” What’s interesting here is that the writer/editor—writing long after the events “reported”—knew that exploitation had begun in Hebrew society especially after the rise of the kingship institution, so that the “warnings—or predictions—attributed here to Samuel were actually historical facts.

³⁰Note here that I am not denying the existence of God, but am only denying that the laws being referred to here were literally given to the early Hebrews by God. Which is *not* to say, however, that revelation may not have been involved with them. Regarding this latter point, I would add that we *cannot* know with any degree of certainty one way or the other.

³¹Indeed, it appears that this attribution of commands to God occurred some time *after* the rise of the kingship institution, and that the king was used as the model for God (henotheism first, then monotheism).

to God was the hope (if but unconscious), on the part of those who created the commands, that such an attribution would lend force to the commands—would, i.e., *motivate* people to follow the commands. When, later, laws of an *ethical* nature appeared on the scene, there was precedent for stating them as commands issued by God—with, again, the reason (probably not recognized consciously by those involved) for so doing being to motivate their fellows to follow the commands.

The ethical laws/commands that *did* develop in Hebrew society can be classified as follows. (Indeed, let me add at this point that, in my opinion, these ethical laws form the very heart of the Law—a point that I will defend later in this section.) Note that although the commands of the familiar version of the Ten Commandments were directed at *all* Hebrews, the following are directed specifically at the society's "haves"—and have their basis in the fact that neediness existed in the society. In addition, it is important to note that a tacit assumption underlying these laws is that the needy were in that state through no fault of their own: they were needy because they were widows, their husbands having been killed in battle; they were needy because they were orphans, their parents having been killed; they were needy because they were poor, this resulting from bad weather or an army stealing their crops/animals; strangers might very well be needy for the simple reason that they were away from home; etc. (We moderns need to keep this fact in mind, because it does not follow that because the needy in ancient Hebrew society were needy through no fault of their own, that that is necessarily true in *our* society today. However, given our tendency—as "good Christians"—to "blame the victim"—for his laziness,³² bad habits, etc.—we moderns need to avoid our tendency to "blame the victim" in knee-jerk fashion, without any analysis of *why* someone is needy.)

(The "ameliorative" laws referred to below are ones that are oriented to existing situations; "restorative" ones, in contrast, have as their intention the restoration of a previously-existing situation. The actions demanded of commands can be either direct or indirect, and also may be either injunctions—i.e., commands to *do* something—or prohibitions—i.e., commands to *not* do something. Finally, commands can be thought of as varying in their degree of specificity—although it is not always easy to decide *where*, on the specific-abstract continuum, one should place a given command.)

³²"Laziness" is one of those words in our language that simultaneously describes (perhaps with accuracy) and explains (wrongly, usually).

I. Ameliorative

A. Direct

1. Injunctions
 - a. Abstract
 - b. Specific
2. Prohibitions
 - a. Abstract
 - b. Specific

B. Indirect (all of which are specific)

1. Injunctions
2. Prohibitions

II. Restorative

A. Abstract

B. Specific.

Let us next, then, identify specific laws under the above headings:

1. Abstract Direct Ameliorative Injunctions

- a. Exodus 21:9 - If a man buys a female slave for his son, he is to treat her like a daughter. (From our perspective today this is an abstract injunction, but in the context of ancient Hebrew society—a “high context” society³³—would not have been.)
- b. Leviticus 19:18 – Don’t take revenge, or hate; love your neighbor as you love yourself.
- c. Leviticus 19:32 - Respect the elderly [again, a law that would have had a more concrete meaning in ancient Israel than it has for us].
- d. Leviticus 25:35 - You must provide for a poor neighbor.
- e. Deuteronomy 5:16 - Respect your parents [also a law that would have had a more specific meaning for the ancient Hebrews].

³³I believe that the concept of “high context” societies and “low context” ones was introduced by Ronald Simkins.

- f. Deuteronomy 10:19 - Show love for foreigners—because *you* were once foreigners [i.e., in captivity in Egypt].

2. Specific Direct Ameliorative Injunctions

- a. Exodus 21:10 - If a man takes a second wife, he must continue to give the first wife the same amount of food and clothing, and the same rights.
- b. Exodus 22:26 - If you take a cloak as a pledge, give it back in the evening [for I am merciful, God says in the next verse].
- c. Deuteronomy 15:7 - 9 - If a fellow Israelite is in need, don't be selfish; lend [don't give!] him as much as he needs.
- d. Deuteronomy 24:15 - Before sundown, pay the wages of those to whom you owe wages.

3. Abstract Direct Ameliorative Prohibitions

- a. Exodus 22:21 – Don't mistreat foreigners.
- b. Exodus 22:22 – Don't mistreat widows or orphans.
- c. Exodus 23:9 – Don't mistreat foreigners; you know how it *feels* to be one.
- d. Leviticus 19:33 – Don't mistreat foreigners, for you were once foreigners.
- e. Leviticus 25:46 – Don't treat you fellow Israelites harshly.

4. Specific Direct Ameliorative Prohibitions

- a. Exodus 20:1 - 17 - The Ten Commandments. [Most of these can be considered as rather specific in nature: don't murder, commit adultery, steal, accuse others falsely, desire another man's house/wife/slaves, etc.]
- b. Exodus 21:20 – Don't kill a slave or you will be punished [*how* not being specified].
- c. Exodus 22:25 – Don't require interest in loaning to a poor man.
- d. Exodus 23:6 – Don't deny justice to a poor man [i.e., be even-handed].
- e. Leviticus 19:13 – Don't take advantage of [i.e., exploit] anyone, don't rob anyone,

don't hold back anyone's wages.

- f. Leviticus 19:14 – Don't curse a deaf man, or cause a blind man to stumble.
- g. Leviticus 25:37 – Don't charge a poor neighbor any interest; don't make a profit from the food you sell him.
- h. Deuteronomy 5:7 - 21 [The Ten Commandments are repeated here, in a version very close to the Exodus 20 version.]
- i. Deuteronomy 23:19 - In loaning to a fellow Israelite, charge no interest.

5. Specific Indirect Ameliorative Injunctions

(An interesting category!—in that there are more ethical laws in this category than in any other one)

- a. Exodus 16:23 - The seventh day is to be a day of rest, dedicated to the LORD. [John Dominic Crossan has made this brilliant comment regarding the significance of the "sabbath" day: "The sabbath day represents a temporary stay of inequality, a day of rest for everyone alike, for animals and humans, for slaves and owners, for children and adults. Why? Because that is how God sees the world. Sabbath rest sends all alike back to symbolic egalitarianism. It is a regular stay against the activity that engenders inequality on the other days of the week."³⁴]
- b. Exodus 23:11 - On each seventh year let the land rest, but the poor may eat whatever grows on it during that year.
- c. Leviticus 19:9, 10 - In harvesting, leave the grain at the edges of the field for the poor; and leave the grapes in the vineyard that were missed for the poor and foreigners. [The law of *gleaning*.]
- d. Leviticus 23:22 [The gleaning of grain is referred to again.]
- f. Leviticus 23:42 - During the Festival of Shelters everyone is to live in temporary shelters for seven days. [What Crossan says regarding the sabbath day—see above—would also seem to be applicable here in that some temporary leveling would be involved, and this might help to renew feelings of empathy on the part of "haves" relative to the "have nots," and other needy people, in their midst. Such a conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the wording here for verses 42 and 43 is: "All the people of Israel shall live in shelters for seven days, so that your descendants may know that

³⁴*The Birth of Christianity*. HarperSanFrancisco. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998, p. 189.

the LORD made the people live in simple shelters when he led them out of Egypt. He is the LORD your God.”]

- g. Leviticus 25:4 - 6 - Let your land rest every seventh year. But even though it is not cultivated, it will provide food for you, your slaves, your hired men, foreigners, and domestic/wild animals [but not the poor?!].
- g. Deuteronomy 5:12 - 14 - Observe the Sabbath; this includes foreigners in your midst, and slaves.
- h. Deuteronomy 14:22 - 29 - [The law of the tithe (so often misrepresented—and utterly so—by the churches!)] Each year take a tenth of your production and celebrate with it; however, on each *third* year the tithe is to go to [what we today would call “food pantries”] for Levites [who have no property], foreigners, orphans, and widows.
- i. Deuteronomy 23:24 - In walking on a path in someone’s vineyard you can eat grapes along the way, but are not permitted to take any away in a container.
- j. Deuteronomy 23:25 - In walking on a path in someone’s grain field, you can eat the grain that you can pull off with your hands, but don’t cut any with a sickle [or carry any away in a container?].
- k. Deuteronomy 24:19 - 21 - After gathering your crops, leave what’s left for foreigners, widows, and orphans. The same for your olive orchards and grape vineyards.
- l. Deuteronomy 26:12 - Every third year give the tithe to the Levites, foreigners, orphans, and widows.

6. Specific Indirect Ameliorative Prohibitions

- a. Leviticus 25:23 - Land cannot be permanently sold, because it belongs to God.

7. Abstract Restorative Laws

- a. Leviticus 19:18 - Love your neighbor as yourself [a law that should be followed not only in the here-and-now, but in a fashion that restores a situation wherein neediness should not occur, or occur but rarely].

8. Specific Restorative Laws

- a. Exodus 21:2 - All Hebrew slaves are to be set free in the seventh year.
- b. Leviticus 25:10 - 12 - The fiftieth year [referred to as the Jubilee year] is to be set apart. All property that has been sold is to be restored to the original owner or his descendants; all slaves are to be returned to their families.

- c. Deuteronomy 15:1 - At the end of each seventh year, cancel the debts of all those who owe you money [except for foreigners, verse 3 adds!].

We have, then, here an amazing set of laws, created for an agricultural society within which relatively little (on a per capita basis) long-distance trade occurred. This fact needs to be pointed out, because it is clear that the laws are not meant to be applied in an urban-industrial society such as the one we are living in at present. Still, they are of interest to us moderns because they demonstrate that a relatively simple society is capable of creating a rather sophisticated—and thoughtfully humane—set of laws. What I find of particular interest is the laws that specify *indirect* actions to help those in need. There is recognition here that few want handouts, because their dignity as human beings is affected adversely in accepting handouts. Therefore, those who created this set of laws had the sensitivity—the genius!—to create laws that enabled the needy to receive help while maintaining their dignity. This is not to say that outright giving is not commanded in these laws, but the inclusion of the various injunctions for helping others in indirect ways seems to suggest to those to whom they are directed (i.e., “haves”) that in helping others they give consideration not only to the *physical* needs of others, but the *psychological* need on the part of recipients for retaining their sense of dignity. What wisdom!

What’s interesting about the ethical laws presented in the Pentateuch is not just the laws themselves, but the *tactics* used by the writers to *motivate* people to follow those laws (another contribution to the Tradition on the part of the early Hebrews). For example, consider the following familiar—and beautiful—passage:

Hear, oh Israel [said Moses], remember this! The LORD—and the LORD alone—is our God. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Never forget these commands [from God] that I am giving you today. Teach them to your children. Repeat them when you are at home and when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working. Tie them on your arms and wear them on your foreheads as a reminder. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4 - 9)

The writer in this case is using what might be termed a “reminder” strategy, advising his fellows to do various things to remind him of the laws (*all* of them, not just the ethical ones)—in the hope that they will then *follow* the laws (i.e., commands that they have attributed to God).

Three additional such tactics can be identified:

- Attempts to generate feelings of empathy for the needy in one’s society.
- Promises for obedience.

- Threats for disobedience.

Let us briefly address each in turn, for these, too, represent contributions to the Tradition—and as such are pertinent to the Bible’s treatment of worship.

B. A Commentary on the Law

1. Feelings of Empathy

- a. The Hebrews are frequently reminded in the Pentateuch that they were slaves in Egypt, and that the LORD had delivered them from that slavery. For example, in Deuteronomy 24:21, 22 we find these words: “When you have gathered your grapes, do not go back over the vines a second time; the grapes that are left are for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. Never forget that you were slaves in Egypt; that is why I have given you this command.”

This reminder seems to have two functions. First, by reminding the Hebrews that they (or their ancestors) had been (supposedly) slaves, the expectation was that they would feel empathy for slaves and other “have nots.” In fact in Exodus 23:9, we find: “Do not mistreat a foreigner; you know how it *feels* to be a foreigner, because you were foreigners in Egypt.” (italics added) Second, by reminding the Hebrews that God had (allegedly) delivered them from slavery, an implicit contract (“covenant”) is being stated: “I have done for you (have delivered you from slavery), now it’s your turn to do for me—and what I want you to do is obey my laws.”³⁵

- b. Institution of the Sabbath day, by giving everyone (including animals) a day of rest, is an equalizer (if but temporary). Besides that, it gives “haves” a time to reflect on how they treat others relative to what God wants—so that they can resolve to do better during the upcoming week.
- c. The Festival of Booths is also not only a (temporary) leveler, but a period of time that brings “haves” and “have nots” together. This, along with the fact that it gives “haves” a fairly lengthy time to reflect on how they treat others, may cause “haves” to improve their relationships with their less fortunate fellows. I use the term “less

³⁵Perhaps this can be regarded as the initial version of the covenant concept. Preceding such a command, however, is, e.g., this one: “Do not spread lies about anyone, and when someone is on trial for life, speak out if your testimony can help him. I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:16) A covenant is a sort of contract between God and humans—but one written and imposed by God! In this case we simply have a command of God: “Do such and such simply because I am ordering you to do it.” A covenant involves both God and humans, with the earliest true covenant in the Bible taking the form, “I delivered you from slavery in Egypt, now it’s your turn to do something for me (i.e., obey the laws that I have given you). Later, the covenant took on a new form: “Do for me (i.e., follow my laws), and I will bless you (as a people).

fortunate” deliberately here because the Bible’s dominant perspective on societal position seems to be that if one is a “have not,” this is not because one is lazy, etc., but, rather, because one either is being exploited by a fellow Hebrew, or has simply had bad luck. Indeed, the Hebrew Scripture’s explanation for why poverty exists in a society seems to be: “Haves” are ignoring God’s laws! How different is the attitude in our society!—in which instead of blaming “haves” for the existence of poverty (neediness in general), we “blame the victim”—and thoughtlessly at that.

- d. The Passover festival might also be mentioned under the “empathy” heading, especially given that it is specifically a “remembrance” festival that commemorates God’s (alleged) deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. As one of the three “pilgrim festivals” the other two being Sukkot (Tabernacles) and Shavuot (Pentecost)—it would have resulted in people traveling to Jerusalem. Given that this would have resulted in contact with fellow Jews in other “economic” (and other neediness situations—e.g., the lame) circumstances, these three festivals may have been designed, in part, to induce feelings of empathy in the society’s “haves” for those less fortunate than themselves.

2. Promises for Obedience, Threats for Disobedience

There is a famous passage in Deuteronomy (11:26 - 28) that reads: “Today I [the LORD] am giving you the choice between a blessing and a curse—a blessing, if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; but a curse, if you disobey these commands and turn away to worship other gods that you have never worshiped before.” What should be noticed in this passage is that the LORD is not addressing Hebrews as *individuals* but as a *collective*. In Jesus’s time the Law was being given an individualistic interpretation, but centuries earlier that was by no means the case: the Pentateuch has the Law being given to a *people*, and the blessings promised for obedience and curses threatened for disobedience are also directed at a *people*.

Thus, the *promises* given in Leviticus 26:3-6 are directed at the Hebrews as a *people*: “If you [as a people] live according to my laws and obey my commands, I will send you rain at the right time, so that the land will produce crops and the trees will bear fruit. Your crops will be so plentiful that you will still be harvesting grain when it is time to pick grapes, and you will still be picking grapes when it is time to plant grain. You will have all that you want to eat, and you can live in safety in your land. I will give you peace in your land, and you can sleep without being afraid of anyone. I will get rid of the dangerous animals in the land, and there will be no more war there.” Likewise, the punishments for disobedience are to be borne by the group, and are essentially the converse of the blessings for obedience. (See, e.g., the passage in Leviticus 26 that begins with verse 14.)

Note here the important point that although the ethical laws listed above are *implicitly* directed at the society’s “haves,” they are *explicitly* directed at the Hebrews as a *people*. Thus, the society’s

“have nots” are not made to feel that they are somehow people of a lesser sort—so that again, psychological considerations were involved in how the laws were stated (even though the intentions were different). (Unfortunately, this fact that the laws were *seemingly* directed at the Hebrews in general became misused; for as thinking, at a later point, became more individualistic, “haves” began turning these laws, and specifically the covenant concept, on its head—a point given more attention shortly, in discussing Jesus’s contribution to the Tradition.) Interestingly, although the *promises* in the Pentateuch for obedience to the Law are directed at the group, and not individuals, such is not the case regarding *punishments* for disobedience. Many such punishments are intended for *individuals* who violate certain specific laws. For example, a number of such cases are given in Exodus 20, including this one (v. 14): “If a man marries a woman and her mother, all three shall be burned to death because of the disgraceful thing they have done; such a thing must not be permitted among you.” In cases where the violator is not condemned to death, there may be punishment combined with the offering of a sacrifice. This is not to say that all of the sacrifices (using that term generically) discussed in, e.g., Leviticus have the purpose of atoning for wrongful behavior (e.g., fellowship offerings are for a different purpose³⁶), but the principal purpose of sacrifices appears to be atonement for sins committed—restoring the harmony that had existed prior to the Atearing of the societal fabric” associated with law-breaking.

A few pages earlier I suggested that ethical laws (and specifically ones other than those in the Ten Commandments) are the “heart” of the Law. I have just completed a review of the ethical laws, but given that the Pentateuch contains many laws other than ethical ones, what is my basis for asserting that the *ethical* laws are the principal ones? What I would point to in response is that in Deuteronomy 15:4, 5 we find: “Not one of your people will be poor if you obey him [God] and carefully observe everything that I [Moses] command you today.” Note that we have a *promise* here, but it is one that is different from other promises in the Old Testament. It makes no reference to blessings that will be received by the Hebrews as a people if they obey God’s commands, nor does it appeal to self-interest on the part of the society’s “haves.” It doesn’t even try to convince people to obey God’s commands because it is their turn to do for God (God having done for them, by liberating them from their Egyptian captors). Nor does it try to induce feelings of empathy for the poor in the society’s “haves.” A very unusual—and interesting—statement in Deuteronomy, then!

The “promise” here, note, is simply an off-hand—and ostensibly unimportant—commentary on what the *societal situation* will be like if God’s laws are followed. Not just the ethical laws,

³⁶Indeed, it seems to be generally true that *sacrifices* are for atoning for sins committed, *offerings* (a special type of sacrifice) serve some other purpose.

mind you, but *all* of them. But take notice: The clear suggestion here is that *the writers of these five books had as their ultimate interest the restoration of a society within which (physical) neediness was absent*. John Dominic Crossan would have us believe (as I noted earlier) that these writers wanted the creation of a radically egalitarian society, but I see that claim as overstating the Bible writers' intentions. Rather, I believe that a more reasonable conclusion is that they wished to restore a situation within which physical neediness would be absent. (They were, I might add, writing so as to give the impression that they were writing while the Hebrews were living in Palestine under the institution of kingship.)

One might argue, I suppose, that they were “reaching” for the “utopian” situation described briefly at several points in the Old Testament. The “utopia” that I am referring to here is first presented (albeit negatively) in Deuteronomy 28:30: “You will build a house—but never live in it. You will plant a vineyard—but never eat its grapes.” We find that utopian situation stated positively, however, in Isaiah 65:21, 22: “People will build houses and get to live in them—they will not be used by someone else. They will plant vineyards and enjoy the wine—It will not be drunk by others.” And in Jeremiah 31:4, 5: “Once again I will rebuild you. Once again you will take up your tambourines and dance joyfully. Once again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria, and those who plant them will eat what the vineyards produce.”

But such a utopia would be a rather strange one, from a Biblical standpoint, for two reasons. First, because it makes no reference to the presence of priests, one must assume that it *has* no priests! Why? Because there is no *need* for them, given that no one would be sinning in such a society, one would assume. Second, this utopia has no need for the love command (except with reference to child care?), because no physical neediness exists in the society. Given these features, and my assumption that the writers of the Bible were wise enough to recognize that there will always be poor people,³⁷ orphans, and widows in the society, it seems to me that they believed that what should be strived for is not a perfect society, but the minimization of physical neediness. This is not to say that they did not favor societal system change: certainly the restorative laws that they developed had precisely that intent—and note that their strategy for bringing about societal system change was the institution of certain (restorative) laws. It is impossible to believe, however, that these writers believed that a perfectly egalitarian society *could* be created: by no means were they fools! Still, the presentation of these (exceedingly brief!) utopian discussions in the Old Testament must be regarded as a contribution to the Tradition, for they “authorize” us moderns to not only critique our society but develop our own

³⁷In fact, in Deuteronomy 15:11 we read: “There will always be some Israelites who are poor and in need, and so I command you to be generous to them.” Note the “and so” here: “Address the neediness of others for the simple reason that it exists, and you can do something about it; don’t expect any reward for doing it, just do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

visions of the Good Society (a sort of activity that was rather common during the nineteenth century³⁸), and generate ideas as to “how to get there.”

Note that to say that there are *poor* people in a society is not the same thing as saying that there are *needy* people in that society. A “poor” person in an agricultural society can be thought of as one who does not *produce* enough for a comfortable life, for whatever reasons. *That* fact, however, does not mean that that person must therefore *consume* little. For if the little that he produces is supplemented with, e.g., food that is supplied (directly and indirectly) to him by others, he will still be a “poor” person—but will no longer be a *needy* one. Thus, there is no warrant whatsoever for Christians (or others) to interpret this passage in a way that justifies their refusal to do anything for the needy: rather than justifying apathy, acquiescence, this passage demands *action*!

A few paragraphs earlier I reached the conclusion that the writers of these five books (constituting the Pentateuch) had as their ultimate interest the restoration of a society within which (physical) neediness was absent. This conclusion leads us another conclusion, one that is as surprising as it is important. In fact, the importance of this conclusion cannot be overstated. It is: **If it can be said that the Law had a *purpose*, this means that the various laws constituting the Law can—and should—be thought of not as *ends*, but as (mere) *means*.** This is a “bombshell” of a conclusion, of course, because it means that those—whether Christians or Jews—who have a fixation on the Law are, in effect, treating the Law as an idol!! (See, e.g., Deuteronomy 5:9.) They are failing to comprehend that there is a *goal* underlying the Law, that goal being the absence of physical neediness in the society.³⁹

Once one reaches this level of understanding, one can consider the question: Is there but *one* means to achieve a situation of “un-neediness”? Is the creation and promulgation of laws the only path to that sort of situation? Paul would add that there is more to it than that (as we shall see shortly). And the “utopia” discussion of a few paragraphs back suggests another means entirely: Work not to create/promulgate laws but, rather, work to bring about *societal system*

³⁸See, e.g., Frank E. Manuel, editor, *Utopias and Utopian Thought*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965.

³⁹I am not, of course, saying here that a society should not establish certain rules, officers to apprehend rule-violators, courts to try the accused, and jails to punish the convicted (and/or programs to rehabilitate them). I *am* saying, however, that the legitimate *end* of laws is that of helping to minimize neediness in the society. Unfortunately, typically the elite of a society establish laws that they believe will further *their* interests, without any thought whatsoever to the existence of neediness in the society.

change (under the assumption that law-generation will not achieve that end⁴⁰). Indeed, the reason I place Charles Fourier⁴¹ in the Tradition is not because he was a notably “spiritual” person but, rather, because he proposed the creation of “phalanxes”⁴²—i.e., small, rather self-sufficient communities—as (what might be termed) “building blocks” of a new society. That is, Fourier proposed an *institutional* solution to the problem. Which is not to say, however, that the Bible fails to present such solutions. For what is the law of the tithe if not an institution? A different sort of institution than the one proposed by Fourier, true, but an institution nonetheless.

Once we come to understand the laws of the Old Testament as *means* rather than ends, we are in an intellectual position to make at least six further conclusions:

- Laws that appear in the Bible should not be embraced merely because of that fact. Rather, one should recognize that some of those laws tend to contribute to the end that I have identified here (i.e., minimal physical neediness), some do not. The former should be heeded, the latter should be ignored—the underlying principle here being that rules that are appropriate for one society at a given time may not be for another.
- Laws *other* than those appearing in the Bible may be relevant for us today. After all, our urban-industrial society has little in common with the sort of society that existed in Bible times.⁴³
- Means other than laws may be relevant for achieving the end. For example, working for societal system change (a topic that was very much “on the table” in the United States during the nineteenth century⁴⁴) may be a better way to occupy one’s mind and time than working to implement rules (including working to implement governmental programs). Granted that the restorative” laws of the Pentateuch obviously had as their intention bringing about societal system change; it does not follow, however, that those of us desiring today to bring about such change should think of law-generation as the appropriate path to such change.

⁴⁰Actually, it would not be an end but, rather, a *means* to the end—of well-being, a lack of neediness.

⁴¹See, e.g., Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986.

⁴²Ripon, Wisconsin (which claims to be the birthplace of the Republican Party—and is evidently proud of that “fact”) began as a Fourier “phalanx” named Ceresco.

⁴³See, e.g., Edward Alsworth Ross, *Sin and Society: An Analysis of Latter-Day Iniquity*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973 (with Introduction to the Torchbook Edition by Julius Weinberg). Originally published by Houghton, Mifflin and Company in 1907.

⁴⁴In the form of “utopian” novels, for example, such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*.

- Although the focus of the Pentateuch seems to be on addressing physical needs, there is no reason why we should limit ourselves to such needs. Indeed, I will argue shortly that a notable part of Jesus's contribution was that he was sensitive to the psychological and spiritual needs of others. Not that such sensitivity is not also present in the Pentateuch as well, however: As I argued in discussing laws which involve helping others in an indirect way, one can assume that behind such laws was recognition that people have self-esteem needs which must not be violated; there is a certain dignity in being human, and to impact that negatively is to commit a serious sin.
- The end of well-being need not be thought of just in terms of humans; there is no reason why animals cannot be included. Indeed, I would even assert that, e.g., geological features should be included—such as Devil's Tower in Wyoming, drumlins in Wisconsin, etc.—the idea here being that given that we humans developed “in nature,”⁴⁵ we have a need for nature to be maintained, not desecrated.
- The end of reducing neediness itself can—and should—be challenged. That is, rather than thinking *just* in terms of working to reduce neediness (in all of its manifestations) in this world, we should recognize that today humans (and other animals) face a unique problem—the possibility that of the numerous (perhaps about 60%) species likely to be extinct by the end of this century, humans will be among them! Therefore, we should recognize that people (and other animals) can have well-being only if they *exist* (!), and should take “global warming” seriously, and work to address that problem with the seriousness that it deserves. Besides, it is well to keep in mind that “global warming” is not only a future threat to many species (including our own), but in the here-and-now is causing problems especially for the poor of our world.⁴⁶ One reason, indeed, why I advocate the creation of a new sort of religious service (I should say “meeting”!) is that I see such services as possible vehicles for finding answers to this problem. Answers that will be acted upon with intelligence and energy.

Thus, perceiving the laws of the Pentateuch as “mere” means—with not all of them even relevant for the end, and there being other (indeed *better*) means—is very liberating intellectually. Would that the Christians in our midst who are so fixated on, e.g., the Ten Commandments that they want them on public display everywhere would come to realize how misguided their viewpoint is. How lacking in true understanding of the Bible they are—to the extent that they sin by making an idol of the Ten Commandments!

⁴⁵See, e.g., Paul Shepard, *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973; and also his posthumously-published (Paul died in 1996) *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*. Washington, DC: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 1998.

⁴⁶See, e.g., Dr. J. Matthew Sleeth's website, www.servegodsavetheplanet.org.

C. The Prophets

The end that I have identified above is present in the Pentateuch, but one needs to *study* the Pentateuch carefully before this end becomes obvious. Is it present elsewhere in the Old Testament? Yes, it is present many places elsewhere (see the first Thomas L. Thompson book cited earlier), but I would like to conclude my discussion of the “Old Testament” (i.e., Hebrew Bible) by referring to just a few passages in “prophetic” books that support my thesis. First, in Hosea 6:5, 6 we find: “What I [God] want from you is plain and clear. I want your constant love, not your animal sacrifices.” How does one love God? One loves God by obeying his commands—or, more generally, by doing his will. What is that? To work for, e.g., a situation within which there is no neediness of any type. Note that one way of perceiving this passage in Hosea is to regard it as Hosea’s summary, if not restatement, of the Law! So that Hosea’s Law contains just the law of loving God, and what *that* involves is doing God’s will—which is to work to eliminate neediness (such work being a form of worship).

Amos expressed much the same point of view. In Amos 5:21 - 24 we find: “The LORD says, ‘I hate your religious festivals; I cannot stand them! When you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them: I will not accept the animals you have fattened to bring me as offerings. Stop your noisy songs; I do not want to listen to your harps. Instead, let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.’” What beautiful language! And what wonderful content!—that what God wants is that you treat your fellows well. We must keep in mind here, of course, that the “justice” that Amos was referring to was not the legalistic sort of justice that *we* think about, but justice in the sense of people getting what they deserve. And what is it that they deserve? They deserve to have their various needs met; thus, those of you whose needs *are* being met (and more) have an obligation to become aware of neediness among your neighbors, and somehow minister to that neediness—doing so constituting worship. Don’t be like a typical American (guided by the values of greed, materialism, and selfishness) and make your primary goal becoming a member of the Billionaire’s Club! In effect, then, Amos also introduced a new Law, consisting of just one positive ethical command: Do justice—which involves ministering to the neediness that exists around you.

Finally, let me close this discussion of the Tradition in the prophets by quoting (once more) a beautiful passage from Micah (6:6 - 8): “What shall I bring to the LORD, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him? Will the LORD be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins? No, the LORD has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.” In a sense we have a new point added here, for Micah is saying in effect that to be part of the Tradition is not only to do what God wants in *general* terms (i.e., work to eliminate

neediness), but do what God wants in more *specific* terms. And, Micah seems to be saying, one can only gain knowledge regarding *that* by *communing* with God, by staying “in tune” with God—by being ever alert to *revelations* that God might choose to give one. This might be done via petitionary prayers wherein one petitions God for guidance; but might also be done, e.g., via the type of service introduced later and “meditative prayer”—the former discussed in some detail in Section B, the latter mentioned in Section B. Again, we in effect have with Micah a restatement of the Law, such that the Law is solely of a Tradition nature—i.e., the Law is about *proper* worship of God.

Micah’s allusion to communing with God raises the question: Does God only reveal truths to those who explicitly seek guidance from God? And in answering that question, I suggest that we consider the case of Samuel. In Chapter 3 of I Samuel we have that wonderful story of Samuel being called by God. Samuel had not *sought* anything from God; rather, God chose to speak to Samuel. The lesson here is that we should not be surprised if God reveals truths to certain people even though they have not asked God for revelations. I think here, for example, of Thorstein Veblen, one of the most creative social thinkers ever to have existed, in my opinion—and one of the great contributors to the Tradition. In reading his brilliant works one may not gain the sense that Veblen was a very spiritual man. In reading his biography (especially if read as a Type B person),⁴⁷ however, one learns that spiritual matters were uppermost in his mind—the suggestion being that he didn’t write about his ideas on such matters for publication because it would not have been fashionable (or “professional”) so to do.

In concluding my discussion of the Old Testament I feel compelled to quote what I regard as the most beautiful passage in the entire Old Testament—a passage that is “Traditional” if ever there was one: Job 29:12 - 17:

*When the poor cried out, I helped them.
I gave help to orphans who had nowhere to turn.
Men who were in deepest misery praised me, and
I helped widows find security.
I have always acted justly and fairly.
I was eyes for the blind,
 and feet for the lame.
I was like a father to the poor
 and took the side of strangers in trouble.
I destroyed the power of cruel men
 and rescued their victims.*

⁴⁷Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and His America*. New York: The Viking Press, 1934. See, e.g., p. 58.

What we have here is another restatement of the Law, in effect. A restatement that is not only specific in content, but suggests that one should do God's will not out of sense of obligation, or a sense that one will receive a reward, but a simple sense that it is a *privilege* to do God's will. What a tremendous sentiment!

D. The New Testament

1. Jesus

Which brings us, first, to Jesus and his contribution to the Tradition. The first point I would make here is that to understand the nature of Jesus's "ministry" one must understand an important feature of the situation into which Jesus was born. An aspect of that situation was the Roman presence, but much more important was religious developments that had been occurring in Jesus's society. It appears that after the return from Babylonian Exile, thinking in Israel became less and less communitarian/societal in character and more and more individualistic. One manifestation of this change (devolution!) was that the covenant concept promulgated in Jesus's time was an inverted—and therefore perverted—version of the Old Testament covenant concept. The Old Testament covenant concept was that if you (as a *people*) follow my laws (whose thrust is to minister to the needy), I (God) will bless you (as a *people*).

The version of the covenant concept taught in Jesus's day, however, was subtly different—sufficiently different, however, to in effect *invert* the Old Testament covenant. For the new covenant was: If I as an individual am doing well, this is because I am being blessed by God; and *that* means that I am behaving in a fashion pleasing to God. On the other hand, if someone is needy, that person obviously is not being blessed, which means that he is behaving in a manner *displeasing* to God. If not the person in question, then some ancestor of the person. That is, a person is needy because he has sinned, or an ancestor had—a point brought out in the amusing story of Jesus's healing of a man born blind in John 9.⁴⁸ Given such an interpretation of the covenant concept, one no longer had an obligation to *minister* to the needy. Rather, one now had a good reason to "*blame* the victim." One could now argue that the needy person had brought his problems on himself; so that not only did one not *need* to help the needy, but it might very well be *sinful* so to do!

Another factor that helps explain the nature of Jesus's ministry is his status as a "*mamzer*"—an Israelite of suspect paternity."⁴⁹ In fact, "stories about Jesus from the later Tannaitic period . . . claim that Jesus was the illegitimate son of a union between his mother Miriam or Mary and a

⁴⁸Is this story actually about *spiritual*, rather than *physical*, blindness?

⁴⁹Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 2000, p. 12.

Roman soldier variously called Pandera, Pantera or Panthera.” Given that a tombstone of a Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera, who lived in Mary’s time, has been discovered in Germany, it “is therefore just conceivable [pun intended?!] that this Pantera could have been Jesus’[s] true father.”⁵⁰

Being a *mamzer* who was also rather intelligent, but of a lower class, Jesus would have been somewhat of an outsider, more alert to his societal situation than most of his fellows—and (therefore) more empathetic with those in need than most of his fellows. Also, in being an outsider he would have had time to reflect. And being intelligent, it is likely that early on he could sense that the societal situation was not as it should be—i.e., there should not be the stratification that he could readily observe. The critical occurrence in his life, however, was coming to know the content of Hebrew Scripture; for as he learned about God’s will as expressed in Scripture, it became increasingly obvious to him that there was a serious disconnect between the Law and covenant in Scripture and what was being taught, in his time, by the “teachers of the Law.”

Therefore, when he reached an age of sufficient maturity (likely about 30 years old), he resolved that, like (his cousin?) John the Baptizer (who may have been an Essene for a time?) he, too, needed to inaugurate a ministry. He saw his mission as being to:⁵¹

- Educate his fellows as to the nature of the True Law of God (i.e., that love of neighbor is the fundamental law)—often using parables,⁵² such as the Good Samaritan parable of

⁵⁰Ian Wilson, *Jesus: The Evidence*. HarperSanFrancisco. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p. 52.

⁵¹I do not deny herein that “Throughout the earliest accounts of Jesus’[s] words are found predictions of a Kingdom of God that is soon to appear, in which God will rule.” (Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 128.) Indeed, Luke has Jesus assert (Luke 4:43) that his purpose was (not to die a sacrificial death on a cross to atone for our sins but, rather) to preach the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus, however, evidently convinced few people regarding this prediction, which prediction turned out to be a false one anyway. (Somehow this prediction of *God’s* imminent coming got “converted,” with some early Christians, into the prediction that *Jesus* would be returning “soon” (i.e., the Second Coming)—an expectation that one finds in all of Paul’s extant letters.) Which fact would seem to suggest that Jesus should be of little interest to us today. One can, however, argue that Jesus’s ministry is still relevant today in that the values he espoused are ones that we can accept today; and that because the Biblical “Kingdom” in “Kingdom of God” is best thought of as *kingship*, we moderns can retain Jesus’s “Kingship of God” idea by arguing that one allows God to be one’s king if one follows God’s commands—with the commands relevant for today being one’s that are revealed today.

⁵²Note that Jesus’s “love of neighbor” command (e.g., Mark 12:29 – 31, derived from Leviticus

Luke 10:25 - 37. Perhaps the most notable, however, of Jesus's teaching efforts is the famous "plan of salvation" passage in Matthew 25:31 - 45, a portion of which is (vs. 35, 36):

I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.

These six "injunctions"—which constitute an "operationalization" of the love command attributed to Jesus—are repeated *four times*—obviously to make the point that "this is what my ministry is all about, folks! Maybe if I repeat myself enough times, you'll get the point!" (Unfortunately, Christianity has *not*; and when, e.g., one is handed a tract containing a "plan of salvation," it likely makes no reference whatsoever to this passage!!)

- Inform his fellows that they were being taught an inverted, and therefore fraudulent, version of God's law (a point embedded, e.g., in the Good Samaritan parable). Matthew 23, in a sense, supports this fact, although what that chapter focuses on is "hypocrisy" (suggesting that the writer of that gospel lacked a good understanding of the "roots" of Jesus's ministry). For example, Matthew 23:23: "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You give to God one tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill, and cumin, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty."
- Do what he, as an individual, could do to address neediness in his society (e.g., heal and exorcize). Whether the healings/exorcisms reported in the gospels actually occurred,⁵³ the point is that the author's intent in including these stories was to make it clear that he regarded Jesus as being in the Tradition.
- Preach the coming Kingdom of God. That preaching had two functions. First, it was an attempt on his part to motivate "haves" to change their thinking and behavior: by threatening them with the "bad news" that God was coming down soon, he hoped that they would change their ways out of fear regarding how God would judge them when He arrived. Second, it was an attempt to give the needy (false?) hope—the "good news" that when God came, their lot would definitely improve.

It can be argued that Jesus not only tried to do what he could—directly and indirectly (via his preaching directed at "haves")—to address the physical neediness present in his society, but also

19:18) can itself be regarded as a sort of parable—given that it, like a true parable, demands interpretation.

⁵³It's possible that some of the *stories* in the gospels referring to miracles performed by Jesus were based on *parables* that Jesus had told—the writer of the gospel not being aware of this fact.

psychological/spiritual neediness. This point has, e.g., been pursued by Robert C. Leslie, who has examined a number of the encounters reported in the gospels involving Jesus in the light of logotherapy.⁵⁴ And related to this, Elton Trueblood,⁵⁵ e.g., has noted that the Jesus of the gospels often used humor, evidently recognizing thereby the healing power of humor. Conveniently, in his Appendix entitled “Thirty Humorous Passages in the Synoptic Gospels,” on p. 127, Trueblood listed the particular passages in the gospels that he had given attention in his book. The modern reader of these passages may, of course, fail to see the humor in these passages, for two reasons. First, we are separated in time by many centuries from the passages. Second, most of them are so familiar to us today that we give little thought to them.

One of the most relevant portions of the gospels for us moderns is found in John’s gospel, the references to a “Helper” in 14:15, 14:26, 15:26, and 16:7. This “Helper” is identified as the Holy Spirit in 14:26. The significance of this reference is that the writer of John in effect is telling us that just as God had guided *Jesus’s* life, so is it possible that after Jesus’s departure, God—via the Holy Spirit—can guide *our* lives as well. (Meaning, e.g., that we should look to the Holy Spirit for guidance, rather than the Bible—a conclusion calculated to cause Martin Luther to turn in his grave!) This possibility is taken seriously by the service design I present in Section B—which is designed, in part, to “attract” the Holy Spirit.

The significance of these references to the Helper in John’s gospel should be recognized as the “bombshells” that they are. For they suggest that, on the one hand, one should not use the Bible as one’s authority—so that so-called “Bible churches” are, *by their very nature*, actually *unBiblical*! And suggest, on the other hand, that no individual (e.g., the Pope) should be treated as an authority either (a point solidified in Matthew 23, wherein Jesus is made to say that one should call no one Father except our Father in Heaven). Rather, one should look to present-day revelation—something the Quakers, for example, do, and something that underlies my service design.

I should add that my service design recognizes, with Paul, that the Holy Spirit can be looked to not only for guidance (i.e., ideas as to what to do) but for “possession”⁵⁶—an idea, by the way, not absent from the Old Testament. For in I Samuel 9:5 - 7 we find (Samuel speaking to Saul): “At the entrance to the town you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the altar on

⁵⁴*Jesus and Logotherapy: The Ministry of Jesus as Interpreted Through the Psychotherapy of Viktor [E.] Frankl.* New York: Abingdon Press, 1965.

⁵⁵*The Humor of Christ.* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964.

⁵⁶For a brilliant discussion of relevance here see Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance, and the Origins of Christianity.* New York: Continuum, 1995.

the hill, playing harps, drums, flutes, and lyres. They will be dancing and shouting. Suddenly the spirit of the LORD will take control of you, and you will join in their religious dancing and shouting and will become a different person. When these things happen, do whatever God leads you to do.”

2. Paul and James

Paul recognized (Romans 7) that although in his *mind* he knew what he should and should not do, what he called his “human nature” (what today we might term his *socialized* nature) caused him to do what he abhorred, and to refrain from doing what he wanted to do. He added, however, that (Chapter 8) if one is filled with the Holy Spirit (which, v. 6, “results in life and peace”), one will be able to overcome one’s “human nature”—one’s supposedly innate sinful nature. And in Galatians 5:16 - 25 Paul wrote at some length regarding the behavioral contrast between being controlled by human nature as opposed to the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, although Paul claimed to admire the Law (e.g., Romans 7:12 and 8:22), and Acts 22:3 has him claim that had studied under Gamaliel (a famous rabbi of the time), his letters give one no indication that he knew the first thing about the Law! So that although the Pentateuch is very definitely reflected in the gospels, it is not at all reflected in any of Paul’s letters.

Still, Paul must be recognized as an important contributor to the Tradition in that he recognized that it is not enough to have a set of rules: just because one has a thorough knowledge of what one should, and should not, do, it does not follow that one will be able to *follow* those rules. What one needs, in addition, is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, so that one’s behavior will be controlled by the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, Paul, in his letters, provided no guidance as to *how* one can become Spirit-filled. But we need not regard that failure on Paul’s part as a serious one, for my service is designed to “attract” the Holy Spirit—to not only provide ideas/insights to participants, but to “possess” them—thereby changing (at least on a temporary basis) their personalities and behavior for the better.

In concluding this brief discussion of the New Testament, I would like to make reference to the rather prosaic Letter from James—which may not have been written by Jesus’s brother James,⁵⁷ but likely *does* express the views of many of the early (Jewish) followers.⁵⁸ At 1:27 James states: “What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world.”

⁵⁷See, e.g., Jeffrey J. Bütz, *The Brother of Jesus and the Lost Teachings of Christianity*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005.

⁵⁸Gomes (*op. cit.*, p. 16) states, in fact: “Recent scholarship places the Epistle of James as first by date [of the books constituting the “New Testament”], followed by I Thessalonians.”

In effect, James repeated Jesus's injunction to love the neighbor, but in a more concrete form; and also recognized that there is a dominant worldview "out there" that guides most people, but must be resisted—because it is "out of tune" with the love of neighbor command. In addition, James makes the point that what's important is to be *religious*—rather than a Jew, Christian, or whatever. Martin Luther had a low opinion of the Letter of James—but all *that* means is that he thereby demonstrated his inability (or was it unwillingness?) to discern the plain message of the Bible.

II. Commentary on the Bible

The Bible is a book (*collection* of books, actually) that is not only an object of study by scholars, but a book that is *used*—and in two rather *different* ways. Ways that are, in fact, virtual opposites one of the other. In labeling these two ways it is useful to borrow terms from theologian Delwin Brown—an *authorization* way, and an *authoring* one. Despite the fact that these two words have “author” in common, their meanings are polar opposites.

One who uses the Bible in the first way perceives the Bible as a *resource* that can be used to support a certain position and/or proposed course of action. One’s starting point, then, is a position/action proposal, and one then proceeds to “mine” the Bible for passages that seemingly lend support to that position/action proposal. Underlying this use of the Bible, of course, is the recognition that the Bible is granted a certain degree of authority in our society, so that the Bible’s value lies in its ability to provide authority to—i.e., to *authorize*—one’s position/action proposal. The Bible comes into play here, then, only because one perceives it as playing a useful role—the “usefulness” here referring to one’s personal interests, the interests of one’s party, the interests of one’s ideology, etc. Interests, in other words, are given priority here, with the Bible playing a supporting role. The authorization way of using the Bible, then, has much in common with the approach typically taken by lawyers in our society: a prosecuting attorney begins with the assumption that the person being prosecuted is guilty, and views his/her task as finding evidence in support of that position; a defense lawyer begins with the assumption that the defendant is innocent, and seeks evidence to establish that “fact” (or at least cast doubt on the defendant’s guilt). In neither case is the orientation to discovering truth—just as with the Bible-user in the first category is there a lack of interest in discovering the truth of the Bible.

It is easy to gain the impression that most users of the Bible in our society are in the first category, but in fact there *are* some in our society who are in the “authoring” category. They may not be as vocal in expressing their viewpoints as those in the first category, but this is no reason for ignoring them. The starting point for “authoring” individuals is the Bible itself, rather than personal (etc.) interests. The authoring person is interested in knowing the content of the Bible, but not from the antiquarian’s viewpoint—for the authoring person is searching not for knowledge *per se*, but *useful* knowledge—knowledge that can be used for guiding his/her life. This means that s/he wishes to arrive at a perspective regarding what the Bible is “about”—expressed in such a way that it can have meaning for his/her life. This implies that the authoring person will view the books comprising the Bible as having been written for the benefit of the authors’ contemporaries, not us moderns—but that that fact does not mean that they are irrelevant for us moderns. Therefore, we need a conception of the Bible that enables us to see a

“message” in it that has relevance for us today. We need, then, not a *summary* of the Bible, but an *interpretation* of it. It is not enough to memorize numerous passages in the Bible; it’s not even enough thoroughly to internalize those passages in addition. For what one needs is an understanding of the Bible that can serve as a guide for one’s *contemporary* life—an understanding that can serve to “author” one’s life. One’s goal here is to have the *Bible* (via a certain understanding of it) “write” one’s life, rather than have one’s life dictated by personal or other interests—with the Bible simply playing a supporting role.

Just as those who are in the authorizing camp can differ substantially in what positions/plans of action they are supporting with the Bible (and therefore in the particular passages they extract from the Bible), so can those in the authoring category differ substantially in how they “read” the Bible—i.e., how they perceive the Bible’s basic “message.” I recognize this fact, and therefore—as one who places himself in the second category—make no claim that my understanding is THE correct one. I do, however, believe that there is substantial merit in the position taken here—that the focus of the Bible is on worship (defined as specified earlier). That is, the Bible urges the view *that* worship is important, identifies kinds of people to whom worship activities should be directed, identifies kinds of worship activities, etc. Some would say that the authoring sort of person should think of the Bible as being the authoring agent, but I prefer to take a wider view. My preference is to think of the *Tradition*, rather, as being the authoring agent, the Bible being an extremely important component of that Tradition, but not the sole component; for the Tradition began prior to Bible times, and has continued down to the present day. This perception enables us moderns to become a *part* of the Tradition, not just *observers* of it; we may very well celebrate the Tradition, but as members of the Tradition we must do more than celebrate it; we must *continue* it, even *extend* it.

Although it is important to have some knowledge of the (worship) Tradition as it existed in pre-Biblical times, and as it has existed since Biblical times, it is not my purpose here to focus on those periods. What I have done in this section is to focus solely on the Biblical period of the Tradition, indicating the multi-dimensional, sophisticated manner in which worship is treated in the Bible. I would add that the diversity involved in the Bible’s treatment of worship can be thought of as giving us “permission” to expand on that provided in the Bible; so that, e.g., the institution I introduce in the next section can be thought of as having its roots in the Bible. Before proceeding to that discussion, however, it will be useful to summarize the points, regarding worship, that have been brought out in this section:

- A central theme of the Bible is that of worship, where “worship” is defined as engaging in activities that contribute to the well-being of others (and refraining from activities that would tend to contribute to the ill-being of other—i.e., “sins”). The “theory” here is that (1) ill-being exists in the society, (2) God is displeased with the existence of ill-being, (3)

God is incapable of taking direct action to remove that ill-being, and therefore (4) is dependent on humans to act on His behalf.

- The Bible identifies various categories of people with which ill-being is associated—e.g., widows, orphans, the poor, the elderly. In many of these cases the *status* of the person (e.g., being an orphan, lame, blind) makes it apparent why the type of person in question has ill-being. And in many of those cases the implication is that the person in question has his or her status through no fault of their own—and *therefore* deserves assistance; that is, *why* the person has his/her status is relevant for *whether* s/he deserves assistance. In other Biblical passages, however, the matter of “why” does not seem to be relevant—the Job passage quoted perhaps being an example. Indeed, in the parable of the Good Samaritan it is natural to ask why the attacked man was so foolish as to travel the route he did, and alone at that. However, for the purposes of the parable, that fact has no relevance; the implication of the parable is that the injured man deserved to be given assistance for the simple reason that he needed it—with the greater message here being that we find it too easy to find excuses for not ministering unto the needs of others, and should address neediness without asking why it exists.
- Activities enjoined in the Bible—explicitly or by implication—are usually ones concerned with physical needs, but some of the activities recommended (ordered, actually) in the “Old Testament” are such that the self-esteem needs of recipients are recognized. And some of Jesus’s actions (e.g., his “handling” of the woman-caught-in-adultery situation) indicates recognition on his part that people have “meaning” needs as well as physical ones; and his use of humor indicates that he recognized its healing power.
- The issue of how to get people to act appropriately is addressed in two ways:
 - Laws are stated, specifying what one should, and should not, do; many of those laws are cultic in nature, but the ones of concern here are the specifically ethical ones. Although often interpreted as “fixed in marble,” it’s clear that they were promulgated as *means* to an end (increased well-being within the group), not ends in themselves, I argued above. The laws are a varied lot, varying in several respects:

There are *positive* laws: respect your parents, love your neighbor, provide for the poor neighbor. And there are *negative* (“don’ts”) ones: don’t mistreat foreigners, widows, or orphans.

The laws vary in degree of specificity. Some laws are rather *abstract*: show love for foreigners, don’t treat fellow Israelites harshly. Others are more *specific*: pay wages to those to whom you owe money before sundown, lend a fellow Israelite as much as he needs.

Some are *ameliorative* in orientation, examples of negative such ones being: don't murder, steal, accuse others falsely. Other laws are of a more long-run, *restorative* nature: Hebrew slaves are to be set free in every seventh year, on each fiftieth year ("Jubilee" year) all land is to be restored to its original owner.

Most laws are *direct*: don't commit adultery; don't desire another man's house, wife, or slaves; don't require interest in loans to a poor man. However, a most interesting group of laws are *indirect*, subtle in their approach: observe the Sabbath, allow gleaning, land cannot be permanently sold.

- Motivational devices are mentioned, to prod people into following the laws.

The laws are attributed to God to give them force.

One is encouraged to repeat the laws often, to tie them on one's arms, to wear them on one's forehead.

The people are reminded of their past slavery in Egypt, so that they will develop empathy for those in need.

The Festival of Passover—to be celebrated every year—is instituted to remind the people of their ancestors' (alleged) sojourn in Egypt, as slaves—again to keep them from forgetting this past slavery, with the hope that this will continually rekindle their empathy for those in need.

The Festival of Booths gives people time to reflect, in a situation of simple living, with close contact with their fellows in varied situations—the purpose again to prevent the fire of empathy from becoming extinguished.

Promises were offered for obedience, threats for disobedience.

- The story-telling associated with Jesus's ministry represents a subtle approach to suggest appropriate behavior. Rather than involving the statement of commands, stories with "morals" were offered, these involving principles for guiding behavior—it being up to the hearers to infer what those principles were. Presumably Jesus believed that such an approach to motivating others to act appropriately would be more effective than issuing commands. Besides, given that God's commands were already a part—central part, in fact—of Judaism, it would have been presumptuous of Jesus to have issued commands. Indeed, had he done so, he likely would have been accused, and convicted, of being a blasphemer.
- Obstacles to acting appropriately are identified—such as the "human nature" one

identified by Paul, and the ideology one (the individualistic thought that enabled an inversion of the Law) that Jesus dealt with (e.g., implicitly in his Good Samaritan parable).

- A solution to overcoming those obstacles is identified, in the form of the Holy Spirit. This agent on the one hand can be a source (via “revelation”) of ideas regarding what worship activities to engage in, and how; it can also “possess” one, and thereby *enable* one to overcome “natural” tendencies to act contrary to God’s wishes (including by refraining from acting in accord with His wishes).

We have, then, in the Bible “worship” approached from a number of perspectives—which fact should embolden us. On the one hand it should encourage us develop an even more expansive concept of worship (so that, e.g., we come to understand addressing the problem of “global warming” as constituting worship); and, on the other hand, it should motivate us to develop ideas concerning what we can do to *help* us worship—such as the New Word Fellowship NeWF) discussed in the next section (which also gives passing attention to “meditative prayer”). It is time next, then, to use several perspectives in presenting a new meeting design that I term the New Word Fellowship.

Before doing so, however, let me briefly state in advance the relationship between the New Word Fellowship and worship: On the one hand, the NeWF should *prepare* participants for worship; this is, in fact, the primary purpose of this institution. In addition, though, participation in NeWF sessions *accomplishes* worship (and also may very result in development of the very concept of what constitutes worship⁵⁹). What I mean by this “accomplishing” claim is that participation in Fellowship sessions would be expected to contribute to the well-being of those involved; it would foster healing for those in need of (psychological) healing, and would enhance the well-being of those who already have a normal level of well-being. The next section will expand on these points—and more.

⁵⁹And in terms of varying levels of specificity.

III. Meetings for Worship

As one who has been a churchgoer virtually all of my life, I have come to believe that if one would ask most churchgoers why they attend church, they would respond:

"We're here because,
"We're here because,
"We're here because
"We're here,"⁶⁰

That is, for most churchgoers, their churchgoing seems to be more a matter of habit than the result of purposeful decision-making. And although for some their churchgoing constitutes worship, I suspect that for many churchgoers their attending church services does not involve even that. That, rather, the reasons for attending church include the following:

- "Going to church 'religiously' will earn me 'points;' and if I earn enough points, I will not be spending eternity in a very warm place."
- "The pastor has a wonderful personality, and tells amusing stories; I really like him!"
- "The pastor's sermons have good intellectual content: they are provocative, well-organized, and even well-delivered. They sure beat the mouthings of the drones on the news programs on TV!"
- "The building in which services are held is awe-inspiring; I need to get away from the ugliness around me by regularly attending services at such-and-such church. Besides, there is no admission charge!"
- "I haven't had a chance to play my clarinet since high school days, but because the church has a small orchestra, it has given me an opportunity to get back in the swing of things with my clarinet. Besides, it's fun to be with the others in that group."
- "The church's choir gives me a chance to sing solos. I love to perform, because it makes me feel important: I like it when after the service someone compliments me on how beautiful my voice is."
- "At my place of employment I'm just another grunt, but the church I attend has all sorts

⁶⁰Thorstein Veblen, *An Inquiry Into the Nature of Peace and the Terms of its Perpetuation*. New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1919, p. 60. First published by The Macmillan Company in 1917.

of committees, and I'm the chairman of one of them. Being the 'boss' for a change makes me feel like I'm a human after all, not just a cog in a big machine."

- "I'm in such a habit of going to church (from my days as a child), that I just don't feel right if I skip going to church on Sundays."
- "Going to church gives me a chance to get away from my 'job' as a homemaker, and socialize a little."
- "Given that I'm an alderman in the local government, it's important that I be seen going to church. Thus, before and after services I try to shake hands and say 'Hello' to as many people as I can. That should help me get elected next time around."
- "I'm from a large family, and most members of the family live here locally. Everyone in the family goes to church, and I would stand out like a 'sore thumb' if I didn't follow suit. In fact, the others would start 'hounding' me if I didn't attend church regularly. And if I stopped going entirely? Well, they would disown me, that's for sure!"
- "I like to go to church and get involved with church activities because that's a way of making important contacts. For example, if I can make friends with a plumber who goes to my church, perhaps he won't 'screw' me if I call upon him for his services."
- Etc.

As I stated earlier, church services don't *involve* worship in a Biblical sense; and one can glean from the statements above that church services typically don't even *prepare*—or prepare well—those attending them for worship activities.

The question that arises, then, is: Given a group of individuals who live in the same general area, who would like to give worship activities a more prominent role in their lives, who would like to meet with like-minded others and, finally, who would like those meetings to be *helpful* to them, from a worship perspective, how should they *design* their meetings? What principles should they follow as they proceed in their meeting design? I would suggest the following:

- The service⁶¹ should provide each attendee the opportunity to express his/her ideas regarding specific activities perceived as worshipful—whether those activities are ones that the speaker is thinking about for himself/herself; or ones of a collective nature,

⁶¹I use the word "service" here rather than "meeting" because it is more familiar in this context. As I pointed out earlier, given that "worship," in a Biblical sense, *involves* service, strictly speaking it is not appropriate to call religious meetings "services"—even if their purpose is the preparation of attendees for service/worship.

wherein the speaker is inviting others in the group to join in, if so inclined. Observation of this principle has, as one virtue, the advantage of enabling members of a congregation to become acquainted one with another. Conventional religious services (including “contemporary” ones) tend not to enable this to occur.⁶² In fact, not only does the typical service not contribute to feelings of community/solidarity within the group; it tends to contribute to the formation of cliques, and thereby animosity. (An ironic fact, I might add!) For if one’s experience, in attending to church, consists only of listening to a minister speak and chatting with a few others during the coffee hour, one is deprived of an opportunity to become well-acquainted with any of one’s fellow congregants.

- It should provide each attendee with the opportunity to *speak* on whatever s/he feels “called” upon to speak about—whether it is a personal matter, a congregational matter, a matter of foreign affairs, or whatever. Indeed, this includes a freedom even to speak on matters that are only tangentially—if at all—related to worship activities! Respect for the person is the guiding principle here, one that must be allowed to override all other principles.
- Corresponding with this opportunity to speak there should be an opportunity to *hear* what others have to say—whether or not that pertains directly, or even indirectly, to worship. An implication here is that one speaking must be allowed to speak without interruption—so that others are able to hear, and understand, what is being said.
- The opportunity to speak and listen should exist in a context in which interaction occurs. That is, people should have the opportunity to react to what others have said.
- This sort of interaction should occur in a situation that does not involve—or even allow, for that matter—exchanges that become heated. That is, interaction must proceed in an orderly manner that allows everyone to “have their say,” but in such a fashion that shouting matches do not occur—and walls are created: bridges are needed, not walls.
- Services should provide the opportunity for attendees to plan activities of a worship nature to be engaged in with members of the group.
- Services should provide an environment that strengthens the commitment of attendees to engage in worship activities.
- Related to this, services should energize those who attend them; they should, i.e., help attendees “recharge their batteries,” so that they will be better able to engage in worship activities throughout the coming week.
- Another way of stating this last point is that services should provide an environment that is inviting to the Holy Spirit—as a Being that can “possess” people, and thereby give

⁶² Having a “greeting” period does not—obviously—enable congregants to get to know one another.

them courage, energy, “aliveness,” etc.

- Given that the Holy Spirit can not only possess people, but reveal truths to them (as John’s gospel points out), services should be designed so that they conduce revelations to those in attendance.
- The environment of services should be such that they conduce the “knowledge” that God is a real, yet ultimately mysterious, Reality—about which little definite can be affirmed. One implication of this principle is that I see it as “telling” us that although music might very well be associated with services, this music should be wordless: there is wisdom in the historic use of organ music in church services. Charles Wesley is often promoted as one who had a gift for writing lyrics for hymns; perhaps it is time, however, that we begin to reconsider the wisdom of congregational singing—and instead allow only instrumental music during services. Why? Because any given set of lyrics expresses a particular theological viewpoint, and therefore by its very nature will be incapable of appealing to all of the members of a diverse group. The reason this latter point is important is that a subprinciple here is that meetings should *not* be restricted to just those with a certain given theological perspective—a principle that deviates rather sharply from conventional practice.
- Services (or perhaps I should say meetings) should provide an opportunity to socialize with others in the group on an informal basis.

Although in the process of enunciating these principles I have made a few comments on how inadequately conventional services “measure up,” I will eschew further commentary—instead encouraging the reader (if s/he agrees with these principles) to apply the principles to the church services with which they have had experience. Rather than critiquing the conventional service, my interest is in presenting ideas for a new service design, and I begin that process below by making a few background comments.

A. Some Background Comments

Whereas those who led Christianity’s initial development had (being under the sway of Greek philosophical concepts) an orientation to *truth* (with its associated intolerance, persecution, and violence), the nature of Jesus’s “ministry”—and specifically his use of the parable—indicates (it seems to me) that Jesus’s orientation, rather, was to *people*. How so? The first point to recognize here is that a parable, *by its very nature*, has no single, objective meaning.⁶³ If it did, there would be no point in conveying one’s message to others in such an indirect way.⁶⁴ This

⁶³See Schuyler Brown’s perceptive comments in *Text and Psyche: Experiencing Scripture Today*. New York: Continuum, 1998, p. 23.

⁶⁴I should note, however, that a number of years ago Hugh J. Schonfield argued that Jesus

fact that parables, *by their very nature*, lack a single meaning—and therefore potentially have as many meanings as there are hearers of them⁶⁵—was, I believe, recognized by Jesus (at an unconscious level, at any rate); and it was for this very reason that Jesus chose to teach using parables.

Jesus's use of the parable in teaching indicates to me that he knew that people were not merely different physically and behaviorally, but different in how they *thought*. And because Jesus believed that humans were created by God, he therefore "knew" that human diversity—including intellectual/mental diversity—was *good*.⁶⁶ Given his appreciation of human diversity, it is not at all surprising that Jesus used the parable in his "preaching." For:

- A parable encourages each hearer to derive an interpretation of the parable that has meaning for that person.
- Given, however, that a parable is a puzzle, and is likely to be so perceived, each hearer is likely to come to see his/her interpretation as tentative.
- Given this, the hearer of a parable is encouraged to realize that other hearers of a given parable not only likely interpret the parable differently, but also tentatively.
- Given *that*, a hearer of a parable may very well (depending on one's personality) feel motivated to ask other hearers how *they* interpret the parable—so that one may broaden and deepen *one's own* interpretation of the parable.
- In the process of this interaction with others, one may very well develop a feeling of tolerance—and even love—for others, and the group itself may develop a feeling of community.
- In the process of this interaction, spiritual growth on the part of each individual may also very well occur.

"spoke in parables so that the spies and informers who made it their business to be present wherever crowds gathered round a public speaker would be unable to detect anything subversive or inflammatory in what he said." *The Passover Plot*. New York: Bantam Books, 1969, p. 74. Originally published in 1966 by Bernard Geis Associates. A 40th anniversary edition of this book was published in 2005 by The Disinformation Company.

⁶⁵*More*, in fact—for in my own experience I have found more than one way of interpreting the Good Samaritan parable, for example.

⁶⁶Paul's reference, in I Corinthians 12:12 - 31, to followers of Jesus as being analogous to the different parts of a body (specifically, Jesus's body) conveys the same idea.

- Because a parable is easily committed to memory, it invites continual *re*-interpretation by each hearer, which means

In short, not only is use of the parable a teaching method that (unlike the dialogical method used by Socrates) tends to promote harmony and minimize violent behavior on the part of hearers; in so doing it tends to *cause* the very sort of behavior that it *advocates*.⁶⁷ So that Jesus's Good Samaritan parable, e.g., not only *illustrated* the "love of neighbor" law⁶⁸ that Jesus identified as central, but tended to *cause*, in a complex way, such behavior on the part of hearers. What genius!!

My own personal opinion is that where Christianity as a formal religion especially is deficient today is in its *services* (which is why I am writing this). Attempts have been made to correct that deficiency through the introduction of "contemporary" services. But the "contemporary worship" service movement can be criticized on a number of grounds,⁶⁹ and my own conviction is that that movement is not the answer to Christianity's problems—for it ignores the question of *why* we should meet in the first place. What I offer herein as an alternative to the "contemporary" service is a new institution, the *New Word Fellowship*. This is a recommendation that could be implemented either by existing churches (not too likely!), or by those who have exited their (Christian) churches—or those who are, and have been, unchurched. Although I do not herein explicitly propose the creation of a new religion, *in effect* I do, I suppose.

A given congregation that is formed might decide that its services should consist just of New Word Fellowship sessions; or might, rather, decide that Fellowship sessions would be featured in its services, but that its services should also contain elements in addition to Fellowship sessions. (Or it might begin by just having Fellowship sessions, and at a later date add other components to its services—and from time to time make changes in the character of its services.) At any rate, Subsections 2 - 5 below focus on the New Word Fellowship *apart* from what role it might be given in a larger service. Subsections 2 - 4 discuss various characteristics of the Fellowship, with Subsection 5 next identifying consequences that can be anticipated for Fellowship sessions.

⁶⁷Assuming, of course, that it *does*, in fact, teach love (if but indirectly).

⁶⁸This is not to say that that's *all* it did. One can argue that the Good Samaritan parable critiqued the religion of Jesus's society, was a critique of the book of Job, etc., etc.

⁶⁹See, e.g., A. Daniel Frankforter, *Stones for Bread: A Critique of Contemporary Worship*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

B. Introductory Remarks

The New Word Fellowship is novel as an institution in the sense that no other institution has its precise characteristics. It is an institution, however, that has borrowed heavily from practices developed by others over a long period of time: practices developed by an early (second century) Christian named Marcus (who lived in Lyon, France);⁷⁰ a tradition associated with certain Native American groups for centuries;⁷¹ and meetings as conducted by Quakers (i.e., members of the Society of Friends).

Second, I must mention as an influence in creating my concept of a Fellowship my personal experience with the adult “Sunday school” class at the church that I have been attending since 1980. The group has consisted of individuals who have certain things in common (obviously), but each member of the group has his/her unique personality, each has had different life experiences, different educational levels are represented, etc. The group is not a random sample of American society, of course, but still is rather diverse—especially in that a variety of views are represented. Despite the latter fact, we all have felt free to express our views (so long as they are not too “heretical”!), because we know that the others in the group would respect them; for there has been a general consensus in the group that we are all “seekers,” and should all be allowed to go down the spiritual path that we feel called to travel on.

I have led this group at various times, and have, during those periods, attempted to promote the concept of shared leadership. So that when, several years ago, we were discussing Peter J. Gomes’s *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (cited earlier), I encouraged others in the group to choose a chapter, and then lead the discussion of that chapter. I did this not because I am lazy, but because I am convinced that no one has a monopoly on the truth—that everyone has something to offer, and that the group would benefit from rotating leadership. At any rate, participation in this group has been extremely important in my own spiritual development (and I think the other members of the group would say the same thing about themselves), and until recently I have attended these Sunday sessions “religiously.”

One of the conclusions that I have been able to make as a result of this experience is that discussions (properly-conducted ones, I should add) can have intellectual value from two different perspectives (one the converse of the other). On the one hand, given that an abstract

⁷⁰Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 179, pp. 41-43.

⁷¹Medicine Story, “Circles of Freedom,” *Talking Stick: The Voice of Mettanokit* (Summer 1993), p. 5; and Lynn Murray Willeford, “Calling the Circle,” *New Age Journal* (May/June 1996), pp. 47, 50, 52, 54, 136-37. The periodical in which the Medicine Story piece was published appeared in my mailbox “out of the blue.” How thankful I am for having received this valuable article!

directive such as “love the neighbor” is literally meaningless as it stands, a discussion process can result in a “fleshing out” of the meaning of the principle so that it becomes more concrete, and therefore more meaningful. On the other hand, if a group, via a discussion process, decides on a certain course of action for the group, and would like a convincing rationale for that action, a discussion process can result in the creation (via revelation?) of a rationale that all find convincing—which fact then helps “energize” them as they plan, and proceed with, that action.

A final point that I would like to make here is that later I refer to the possibility of one experiencing an altered state of consciousness (i.e., a “natural high”) during a given Fellowship session, and that I have myself experienced such a phenomenon. Years ago I briefly had such experiences in conjunction with periods of intellectual creativity, but in 1976 was privileged to have a “high” that lasted continuously for over three months.⁷² I don’t know why I was granted this valuable experience,⁷³ but *do* know, first, that such an experience is not that uncommon cross-culturally and historically.⁷⁴ And, second, believe that such an experience was common with the first “Jesuans.”⁷⁵

C. Preliminaries

What is a New Word Fellowship? At its most basic level it is a discussion group (on the surface not terribly unlike the self-improvement Junto club established by Benjamin Franklin in 1727). It differs from the ordinary discussion group, however, in that its participants assume (for one thing) that they will receive guidance from God during their deliberations—and may even experience Spirit-indwelling (which manifests itself as an altered state of consciousness).

⁷²In addition, two books have given me a “natural high”: Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise*. New York: New American Library, 1958. First published by Charles Scribner’s Sons in 1904. Louis Wallis, *Sociological Study of the Bible*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1912. I read the first book in 1959, the second in 1984.

⁷³During that period my perceptions changed so that, e.g., I was perceiving differences in *kind*, but not *degree*. I recall, e.g., talking to a young woman during that period, encouraging her to run for a local political office. She responded that she felt that she was somewhat of a freak in being rather tall. Up to that point I had not noticed that “fact” about her. The “lesson” that I learned from that experience is that although it is “natural” to perceive differences in kind, such is not the case for differences in degree: such differences are ones that our minds *impose* on reality.

⁷⁴See, e.g., Felicitas D. Goodman, *Ecstasy, Ritual, and Alternate Reality: Religion in a Pluralistic World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

⁷⁵For a brilliant discussion see Stevan L. Davies, *op cit*. See in particular Chapter 12 (“The Christian Cult,” pp. 170 - 87).

Participants in a given Fellowship meet at a specified place on a regular (or not) basis. As they arrive at the meeting place, they are given a slip of paper by a functionary (the “Bishop”⁷⁶); they write their name on the slip, then give it to the Bishop, who then deposits it in a container. When the appointed time for the meeting arrives, the Bishop draws one slip (i.e., name) from the container—at random. (Use of a random procedure is based on the ancient Hebrew conviction that it is God who chooses when selections are made at random⁷⁷) The first name drawn by the Bishop designates the *Prophet* for that session—that is, the person who will initiate the discussion, and be authorized to keep the discussion “on track.”

(For the sake of clarification, I need to add at this point that the discussion that follows assumes one Fellowship session per congregation at any given time. Given that the ideal size of a Fellowship is about 12 individuals, if 50 members of a given congregation were present at the meeting place on a given day, the Bishop would create four Fellowship sessions for that day. For example, the first name chosen would be the Prophet for the first Fellowship, the thirteenth name the Prophet for the second group, the twenty-fifth name the Prophet for the third group, and the thirty-eighth name the Prophet for the fourth group formed that day. I might add that this procedure for forming subgroups within a given congregation at a given time means that the possible combinations of others in one’s group can be huge indeed. The relevant formula here is $n!/r!(n-r)!$, where n is the number of others in one’s whole congregation (present at a given time) and r is the number of others in one’s particular subgroup at a given time. Rather than using this formula, however, I would suggest that the Bishop refer to the chart in the Appendix.)

Note that rather than the position of Prophet having a permanent occupant, it has a *new* occupant for each session. In other words, a rotational system is used, one based on the use of sortilege (i.e., a random procedure). This means not only that participants in a Fellowship do not know in advance who the Prophet will be for a given session. It also means (for the benefit of those who have some background in statistics) that each participant will, over time, occupy the position of Prophet about the same number of times. I realize that living, as we do, in a hierarchical society, most of us are used to there being “bosses” and “grunts”: despite the fact that we supposedly live in a society within which all are equal, we all know that that is far from true (even in a legal sense).⁷⁸ Consequently, most of us have become used to thinking of there being two classes of people, leaders and followers—and may therefore find it difficult to accept the notion that

⁷⁶The last will be first, and the first last!—as the Bible says (e.g., Mark 10:31).

⁷⁷Those who know their New Testament will also recall that after the death of Judas Ascariot, his successor was chosen by use of a random procedure (according to Acts 1:26, at any rate).

⁷⁸See, e.g., writings by Michael Parenti and G. William Domhoff.

anyone can be a leader. The Fellowship, however, is based on the assumption that everyone is not only important and has something to offer, but that anyone *can* be a leader.

Once a Prophet has been chosen, and the participants are seated, the Prophet speaks—i.e., allows God to speak through him/her. The Prophet is expected to speak about that which s/he feels genuinely “called” to talk about—whatever that happens to be. So that although participants in a Fellowship all accept Jesus’s love of the neighbor command as their central “creed,” the Prophet should feel no obligation to speak words directly pertinent to that creed.⁷⁹

Whether or not the participants are seated around a table, they will be seated in a circle, and a single candle is assumed to have been placed (by the Bishop) at the center of the circle—the flame symbolizing God: a real, if intangible, entity.⁸⁰ It is placed at the center of the group to signify that the participants all wish to place God at the center of their lives (with, of course, any agnostics and atheists present excused from so perceiving the candle).

After the Prophet has delivered a message (of perhaps 15-20 minutes), the others have an opportunity to react to the Prophet’s remarks. Discussion proceeds with the use of a “talking hoop”⁸¹ passed around the group in a clockwise manner, beginning with the person to the Prophet’s immediate left. That is, a hoop (symbolizing the unity of all things) is passed from participant to participant, the understanding being that only the person holding the hoop has the right to speak (the Prophet having, however, the right—indeed, the responsibility—to intervene any time s/he believes this to be necessary for the good of the group).

When a given participant has finished speaking, s/he passes the hoop to the first person to the

⁷⁹I am reminded here of Matthew Fox’s statement that psychologist Otto Rank, in *Art and Artist*, had declared that there is a profound purposelessness in all true art. (*Wrestling With The Prophets: Essays on Creation Spirituality and Everyday Life*. HarperSanFrancisco. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.) The statement occurs on p. 211 in Chapter 11 (“Otto Rank on the Artistic Journey as a Spiritual Journey, the Spiritual Journey as an Artistic Journey”).

⁸⁰In addition, I would like to think that what Paul Shepard states regarding our ancient ancestors sitting around a fire apply to NeWF participants sitting in a circle, with a lit candle at the center. See pp. 155 - 56 in his previously-cited *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*. For example, Shepard states (p. 155): “Fire was perhaps the first metaphor and therefore the master stimulus to deliberation, the symbol of life itself.” Shepard would assert that we humans—including us moderns—are drawn to sitting around a fire at night because selection processes, acting on our biology, have “designed” us for such an activity.

⁸¹Another possibility would be to use a vine segment, the allusion here being to John 15:5. Also, a rope segment might be considered, given that a rope consists of a number of different strands—thus symbolizing well the goal of a New Word Fellowship to combine unity with diversity. This latter suggestion has its origin in Gus DiZerega, *Pagans & Christians: The Personal Spiritual Experience*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2004, p. 78. Originally published in 2001.

left, who then speaks, passes the hoop to the next person, etc. This process continues until no one has anything to add to the discussion (or an agreed-upon time limit is reached).

D. Guiding Principles⁸²

Certain principles would (ideally) be followed during Fellowship sessions, and it will be useful simply to list them here:

- a. Members of the group must accept the above premises and conclusions; i.e., at least *that* much uniformity must exist within the group. They must regard each other member of the group (each other *human*, in fact) as their equal, and accept as a truism that one person's views are as worthy of expression and consideration as those of any other person in the group.
- b. Each member of the group should have an opportunity to “speak one’s truth”⁸³ and, indeed, ideally all members will speak for about the same length of time during a given session. This ideal likely would never be met, however, because during a given session one or more members may not feel “led” to speak—and certainly one should not feel an obligation to speak just for the sake of speaking. On the other hand, though, if one feels very talkative during a given session, one should attempt to restrain oneself: monopolization of the talking is strongly discouraged (and should, in fact, be *prevented* by the Prophet).
- c. When one is speaking, one should feel at liberty to say what one genuinely feels “called” to say. Which is not to say, however, that one should resort to vulgarity, or impropriety in some other way (e.g., speaking in an undiplomatic manner).
- e. When one is speaking, one should avoid criticizing others in the group, or trying to discredit what they say. One should show respect for others in the group—keeping in mind that “loving the neighbor” entails allowing others to come to their own conclusions (and choosing their own spiritual path), rather than imposing one’s own point of view on others. If one has a viewpoint that is in opposition to one that someone else has expressed, one should simply state one’s *own* (contrary) viewpoint without comment on what someone else has expressed.
- f. When one is *not* speaking, one should listen—not just be preparing one’s *own* “speech” for when it is time for one to speak again. One is expected to be (or at least *become*, with time) convinced that one does not possess the whole truth; that, rather, one is like one of the blind men feeling the elephant. So that given that one wishes to

⁸²Compare with Paul's comments in I Corinthians 14:29 - 32.

⁸³This principle is, of course, automatically followed by virtue of the fact that a “talking hoop” (or whatever) is used to help control discussions during the session.

know *more* of the truth, one needs to listen attentively to others as they speak.

- g. If discussion seems to be proceeding down a certain path “naturally,” one should not (as Prophet) try to divert it down some other path—either because one doesn’t like that path, or because one has certain notions of where the discussion *should* head, and believes one has the right to divert the discussion in that direction.
- h. All should be aware of the danger of the group becoming too “cozy.” Thus, each person present (and not just the Prophet) should consider the possibility that at times s/he should act as a (diplomatic) “devil’s advocate” (but only when it is one’s turn to speak—unless one is the Prophet for that particular session).
- j. There is always the possibility that some who join a given NeWFian congregation will not “fit in” well. Therefore, a congregation should decide early on in its existence how it will handle that eventuality. It might decide, e.g., that at the beginning of any meeting any member will have the right to call an Exclusion Vote. What could be done, then, is that the Bishop would distribute “ballots” to all of those present, and that those present would then write down the names of those members that they thought should be expelled from the congregation. The Bishop would then collect the ballots, count the number of names during the service, and then announce the results at the end of the service—announcing only the names (if any) of those to be expelled. The basis for expelling a member might be, e.g., that if a given name appeared at least $0.65x$ times, that person would be expelled from membership in the given congregation (where x = the number present that day).

Note that key assumptions underlying a Fellowship are that each member of the group has a unique viewpoint, that this is good, and that individual spiritual development (defined in the broadest possible sense) on the part of each member should be fostered. It seems to me that these assumptions are *inherent* in Jesus’s use of parable-telling in the (canonical) gospels—so that there is, with the New Word Fellowship, emulation of a key element of the *style* of Jesus’s “ministry” as presented in the gospels. The speaker of a parable implicitly assumes that each of his/her listeners is unique, that that is good, and that each hearer will—and should—interpret the parable in a way that is meaningful to that person; and that over time each person will find ever more meanings in a given parable. The parallel between Jesus’s use of the parable in the gospels and use, by us moderns, of the Fellowship is not, of course, a perfect one. But I am pleased that the Fellowship has important characteristics in common with the use of parables by the Jesus of the gospels.⁸⁴

⁸⁴One with a scientific background might say that the New Word Fellowship represents an “operationalization”—for the present, and United States society—of the approach to ministry used by Jesus centuries ago, in a different part of the world.

E. Expected Outcomes

In this section I identify and discuss major consequences that I associate with participation in Fellowship sessions, doing so using two different approaches—first a *generic* approach (i.e., one that focuses on *types* of consequences), and then a *genetic* (i.e., *causally-oriented*) one.⁸⁵ I might add here that if there is magic in ritual,⁸⁶ then so too can there be magic in “institutional furniture.”⁸⁷ The “magic” in a New Word Fellowship, it seems to me, lies in one’s being aware of the possible consequences associated with participation in a Fellowship. That is, if one knows in advance what effects participation in a Fellowship may have on oneself, this may increase the likelihood that participation will *have* those effects—a self-fulfilling prophecy. The point here is that humans are complex creatures, and that although it is true that the situation one finds oneself in (institutional and otherwise) likely will have some effect on one’s thinking and behavior, foreknowledge of possible consequences of participation can also impact one’s thinking and behavior.

Let me begin here by noting that University of Wisconsin-Madison philosopher Max C. Otto,⁸⁸ in discussing his concept of “realistic idealism” years ago, gave the example of a conflict situation that was resolved amicably. The conflict involved the owners of a (gasoline) “filling station” in a small town who wanted to cut down some elm trees, and town residents who opposed that action. Otto noted that the conflict was resolved by a “young man,” and emphasized that this young man did not propose a *compromise*—i.e., a solution that by its very nature is one that is *accepted* by all parties concerned, but *satisfies* none of them. Rather, the young man proposed a *creative*—i.e., a higher-level—solution; a solution that not only *satisfied* both parties completely, but (thereby) *removed the acrimony* that had developed between the parties. Otto added that such solutions are not only *desirable* (obviously!), but *possible*. Unfortunately, however, Otto offered no guidelines for achieving such solutions.

⁸⁵I might note here that I see Fellowship sessions as involving *ritualized* discussion, and believe that that ritualization has important—and multitudinous—consequences. Relevant here is Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities*. HarperSanFrancisco. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991. On p. 71 Driver asserts that the “major functions of ritual . . . [are] making and preserving order, fostering community, and effecting transformation.” Driver then devotes Chapter 7 to “Order” (pp. 131 - 51), Chapter 8 to “Community” (pp. 152 - 65), and Chapter 9 to “Transformation” (pp. 166 - 91).

⁸⁶Driver, *op. cit.*

⁸⁷Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 210. Introduction by Robert Lekachman. Originally published by The Macmillan Company, 1899.

⁸⁸*The Human Enterprise: An Attempt to Relate Philosophy to Daily Life*. New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., 1940. See Section vii (pp. 146 - 49) of Chapter V (“Realistic Idealism,” pp. 128 - 53).

I suspect, though, that Dr. Otto would approve (were he alive today), with enthusiasm, the New Word Fellowship because it is designed (for one thing) to produce creative ideas. Not that it is so *guaranteed*, of course; but creative ideas should be a common occurrence in Fellowship sessions. Creative ideas that serve to resolve conflicts, on the one hand—but other types of creative ideas as well. Also, the fact that a Fellowship fosters the achievement of creative ideas concerning which there can be a *consensus* has, in turn, various consequences—discussed below under two headings. Finally, the fact that the creative ideas achieved can be thought of as having been revealed by Deity (and undoubtedly *will* be by some participants) *itself* can have various additional consequences (also commented upon below).

1. Outcomes: Generic Approach

I have already made a few comments on outcomes, but below discuss them in more detail, using first a *generic* approach—doing so under three headings: intellectual, sociological, and personal. After having used that approach, I use a *genetic* one.

Intellectual

Two factors, I believe, account for the creativity that would occur during sessions (or afterward, as a result of the stimulation that occurred *during* a given session). First, those participating in a Fellowship would have certain things in common, but would also be diverse in various respects—and this mixture of uniformity and diversity would conduce creativity. A certain degree of homogeneity is needed in a group for it to function effectively as a group; but a certain degree of diversity is needed (for a discussion group) if it is to produce creative ideas and decisions.

But a certain degree of diversity is not in itself enough. Members of a Fellowship, if they are to produce creative ideas/decisions, need to interact with one another in a harmonious manner. In recognizing this fact, I have designed the Fellowship in such a way as to promote such interaction. That is, discussion in a Fellowship proceeds in a *structured* fashion, one that is institutionalized; the intent of that design is to prevent the occurrence of acrimonious exchanges, encourage honest expression of one's views, and encourage consideration of the views of others. My hope is that the design of the Fellowship—along with variety in participants—is such as to conduce creativity. Insofar as it is discovered (through actual experience) that the Fellowship's design is flawed so far as that goal is concerned, my hope is that the participants will become aware of those flaws, and will then act to correct them.

Insofar as one thinks of a Fellowship as having the capability of producing “good” *decisions*, one way of looking at this is that each of us is “crazy” in some way, but that if a *group* is involved in making a decision—and uses a procedure analogous to that of a Fellowship—the individual

“crazinesses” will get cancelled out. At any rate, this was the theory used by the group of individuals who created “Feeling Therapy.”⁸⁹ (It’s good, isn’t it, that therapists—some of them, at any rate—realize that they are not completely sane! Or is it scary?!)

Sociological

Precisely because I foresee that creative ideas and decisions will emerge from Fellowship sessions, I believe that there will be sociological implications. Discussion of a given topic would be expected to proceed (usually, at any rate) until some sort of consensus is reached, and it is reasonable to expect that all (or virtually so) participants will have contributed to that consensus—and that each *knows* that s/he has. *That* fact will generate in each participant a certain degree of enthusiasm; and *that* fact, in turn—combined with the fact that all members of the group are in *agreement* about something—will help to bring the group together. In fact, I suspect that not only will a feeling of solidarity/community develop in the group as a consequence of the achievement of a creative consensus, but an *enthusiastic* such feeling.

Had other “rules of engagement” been established, members of the group may have quickly become involved in acrimonious exchanges, so that not only would no consensus emerge, but the group would not develop a sense of solidarity. In fact, the group might simply dissolve. I am hoping, however, that the Fellowship has been designed in such a way that not only will creativity be stimulated, but an intense feeling of *community* on the part of participants. Insofar as “fine tuning” is needed in the Fellowship’s design on this score, it will be done whenever needed, I would hope. Institutions seem to have a tendency to ossify; I hope, however, that the design of the Fellowship is such that “hardening of the arteries” would never occur.

Personal

There are, I believe, three types of *personal* consequences that participation in a Fellowship can have for participants. First, participants are likely to acquire certain *behavioral habits*: speaking one’s mind honestly and with conviction; being courteous in one’s interactions with others; becoming a good listener, more prone to consider the ideas that others have to offer; and more modest in one’s claims regarding what one knows. Regarding this latter point, I believe it likely that participants will, over time, come to see themselves as possessing *part* of the truth, but *just* part—so that it is wise for them to listen to what others have to say, because others *also* have part (but not all) of the truth.

⁸⁹See Werner Karle, Lee Woldenberg, and Joseph Hart, “Feeling Therapy: Transformation in Psychotherapy,” in *Modern Therapies*, edited by Virginia Binder, Arnold Binder, and Bernard Rimland. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976, p. 81.

Anyone who has observed people over the years will have noticed that some individuals seem to have a proclivity to try (if but unconsciously) to control⁹⁰ others, while other people seem to be rather passive and susceptible to control/manipulation by others—even seemingly welcoming it. These tendencies⁹¹ may have, in part, a genetic basis, but both are nevertheless objectionable. Fortunately, I believe that participation in a Fellowship will help wean individuals in the first category from their tendency to be overly-assertive and domineering; and also foster in the second sort of people a greater degree of self-confidence and assertiveness. In other words, I see the Fellowship as an *equalizing* force that can counter “natural” tendencies toward hierarchy in favor of more egalitarian relationships between people.

Second, participants may develop, and be able to sustain, certain *feelings*: feeling, e.g., enthusiastic, optimistic, and energetic. And these feelings will not only mean that participants will acquire a sense of well-being as a result of their participation. In addition, they will experience improvement in their physical,⁹² emotional, and mental health. And their high level of well-being will not only enable them to *plan* well, but *work* well in the event that they have planned some course of action involving them (or some of them) as a group.

Finally, the Fellowship experience can lead to an *altered state of consciousness* for some, if not all, participants: different people experiencing a “natural high” at different times, and for different durations. This “high” (resulting, I suspect, from the achievement of a creative consensus) will not only give one well-being, but may very well then become itself a further *source* of additional creative ideas.

But another consequence of becoming “high” is that one may begin to perceive what might be termed “spirit” in the things around one, especially in other people (in which case the term “soul” would be appropriate). In so perceiving other people, one’s behavior toward them will be affected in that one will strive to be considerate and courteous toward them, even loving. And insofar as one sees spirit in the *natural* world one will attempt to refrain from doing anything that might desecrate it, including littering. The idea here is that if one perceives spirit in things, in

⁹⁰They may perceive this as exercising “leadership,” rather. That is, they may put a positive “spin” on their objectionable behavior.

⁹¹For a somewhat old, but excellent, discussion see Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: On Women, Men, and Morals*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1985.

⁹²Including psychosomatic ones. On the topic of such illnesses see the old, but still fascinating, A. T. W. Simeons, *Man’s Presumptuous Brain: An Evolutionary Interpretation of Psychosomatic Disease*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1960.

effect one regards them as *holy*, and therefore has reverence for them; given *that*, one behaves (or strives to) toward them in a manner that will not involve harm—and may very well involve the opposite. Writer Bill McKibben has observed (in *The End of Nature*, I believe) that he found it peculiar that Christians on the one hand claim to believe that God created the earth (along with the rest of the cosmos), but seem to feel no compunction in polluting and otherwise desecrating earth. Perhaps the explanation for this seeming paradox is that Christians tend to conceive God exclusively as a discrete *transcendent* Being, rather than as an *immanent* entity.⁹³ And are too narrow-minded in their thinking to recognize that such pigeon-holing of God is (from, e.g., a Buddhist perspective⁹⁴) blasphemous.

Finally, some (e.g., me) may relate the Christian concept of a Holy Spirit with a natural high.⁹⁵ On the one hand, they may perceive the experience of a high as “possession” by the Holy Spirit; and if they do this, they may begin to lose the perception of God as a discrete transcendent entity “out there” some place. Rather, they may begin to think of God as a *Presence* (in the sense of Matthew 18:20, but referring to God rather than Jesus). On the other hand, they may perceive creative ideas they receive as “revelations” from God (perceived as a transcendent Being,). Note that these two ways of relating Deity to a “high” are not necessarily in agreement, for the first clearly involves perceiving Deity as immanent in a special sense (a Presence within certain humans), whereas the second seemingly involves perceiving Deity as a discrete transcendent

⁹³Few Christians seem to understand the fact that “God” can be—and has been—conceived in a variety of ways. For an excellent recent discussion of the God concept see Daniel C. Maguire, “More People: Less Earth: The Shadow of Man-Kind,” in (pp. 1 - 63) *Ethics for a Small Planet: New Horizons on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*, by Maguire and Larry L. Rasmussen. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998. Dan is a Professor of Ethics at Marquette University. Also of value here is Chapter Four (“God: The Heart of Reality”) in (pp. 61 - 79) Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. HarperSanFrancisco. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003.

⁹⁴See Raymond Panikkar, “Nirvana and the Awareness of the Absolute,” in (pp. 81 - 99) *The God Experience: Essays in Hope*, edited by Joseph P. Whelan, S.J. New York: Newman Press, 1971.

⁹⁵Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* and the movie *Groundhog Day* (starring Bill Murray) are famous examples of individuals undergoing a personal transformation—becoming Spirit-filled, one might say. In the former, Scrooge is forced to observe his life at different points in time, whereas in the latter Phil Connors is forced to live a given day over and over until he becomes a new person. Unfortunately, not only does neither of these works have much relevance for real-world people interested in achieving personal transformation. Both are naive in not realizing that societies are systems, meaning in part that there is congruence between the institutions of the society and the dominant value system associated with those “peopling” the society. Meaning further that it is foolish to expect significant values change without concomitant institutional change. I have developed a strategy for bringing about societal system change while recognizing the interrelated nature of institutions and values, but this is not the place to present that strategy.

Being. It would seem, however, that some who think of creative ideas as having their source in Deity would also be able to conceive of Deity as immanent (in people, at least), and would thereby be able to think of their “high” as also constituting “possession” by the Holy Spirit (conceived as a Presence rather than discrete transcendent Being).

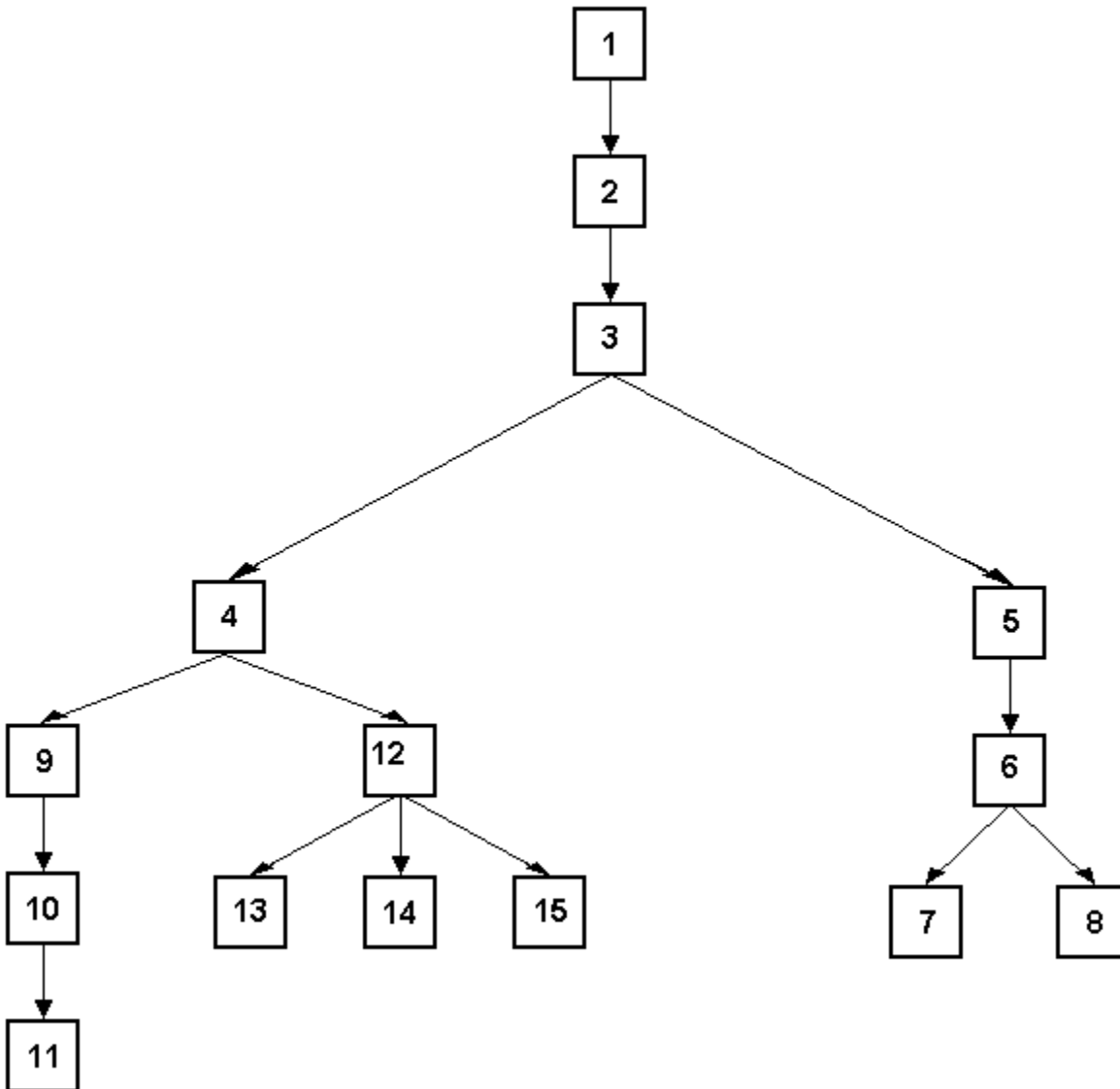
2. Outcomes: Genetic Approach

To further comment on consequences associated with Fellowship participation, let me next use a different approach (one focusing on causal relationships), basing my discussion on the following diagram (next page).

Each numbered comment below refers to the corresponding number on the diagram. The discussion that follows is intended to complement that given earlier in this section, not duplicate it. Overlap exists between the two discussions, but some important points made earlier are not repeated below; and, on the other hand, the discussion below adds some points not made above. Together, the two presentations should give the reader a fairly clear picture of the consequences that I foresee for Fellowship sessions. If I discuss only *positive* consequences, that is because that’s all I foresee!

1. During the course of a Fellowship session creative ideas (i.e., new understandings, insights, ideas regarding what certain individuals or the group might do, etc.) may be received by one or more participants. At any rate, different perspectives are likely to be presented, and the various thoughts spoken (whether or not original to the speaker) can be thought of as pieces of a puzzle.⁹⁶
2. During some sessions a creative idea will occur to someone that results in putting these various pieces together to form a complete picture. This will not occur in all sessions—perhaps not even in most sessions. But it *will* occur in some sessions—especially once participants gain some experience with the Fellowship as an institution.
3. That picture—i.e., that consensus—will be recognized by each participant as a good idea—a great idea, in fact. And because each will realize that s/he has made some contribution to that consensus, all will develop a strong commitment to that consensus.
4. That realization will produce in at least some participants a “natural high,” an altered state of consciousness. With some having such an experience, the “high” will last only briefly; with others, it will continue for hours, even days—perhaps until the next Fellowship session. The consequences of this altered state of consciousness are discussed under points 9 - 15 below.

⁹⁶But not pieces capable of being put together in just one way. In that respect, the analogy here is not a perfect one. (*None* are, of course!)



5. Achievement of a consensus likely will result in the development of a strong sense of solidarity, “community,” within the group. A feeling that one’s own personality has merged with the group—yet that one retains one’s distinctiveness as an individual as well.
6. Gaining a sense of Oneness with the others in the group will also result in a feeling of well-being on the part of all members of the group. That is, all will develop feelings of enthusiasm, optimism, energy, “aliveness,” a sense that one is a choice-maker in control of one’s destiny, etc. Of course, the individuals comprising the group will have different personalities, so the feelings they develop in response to the achievement of consensus will vary.

7. If the consensus reached concerns an action to be engaged in by the group as a group, the feelings of well-being and enthusiasm will ensure that the action is performed well and expeditiously.
8. The feeling of well-being engendered by the consensus achieved will contribute to the physical, emotional, and mental health of each of the participants.
9. If the achievement of a consensus by the group results in a “natural high” on the part of a given participant (it may occur to several, even all), that person’s perceptions may be altered—in that the person may begin to perceive that “there is more in Heaven and Earth than is dreamt of in your philosophy” That is, the person may begin to perceive things not just as consisting of matter, but also an intangible something that might be termed “spirit.” Some will limit this perception to other people; others will limit it to animate beings; still others will begin to perceive “spirit” even in inanimate things such as rock formations.
10. Insofar as one perceives “spirit” in something, one will develop a feeling of respect—even reverence—for that thing. One may even perceive it as holy—as has occurred with many mountains, including the Black Hills in South Dakota.
11. That attitude toward other things will have behavioral implications for the one with such a perception in that s/he will not consciously engage in hurtful behavior directed toward things that are respected. One may even engage in *positive* behaviors toward them, including worshipful behaviors.
12. The experience of an altered state of consciousness may affect one’s conception of Deity (if one has such a conception). The conventional way of conceiving Deity in our society is as a discrete, transcendent Being given the name God. But the experience of a “high” may change one’s conception of Deity—even to the extent that one no longer finds the name “God” as an adequate name for Deity. For one may, e.g., come to conclude (Buddhist-wise) that *naming* Deity is itself blasphemous!
13. One who believes in Deity may come to see the consensus reached as being a *revelation* from Deity (i.e., John’s “Helper”⁹⁷). This means that one continues to perceive Deity as a discrete, transcendent Being, but now is asserting that one does not accept the theory that the Christian Bible uniquely embodies God’s revelation. With the Quakers one now “recognizes” that God is *not* dead (as the Biblicists imply), is still alive, and still reveals Truths to humans. And although one continues to think of God as a discrete, transcendent Being, one may come to think that God’s *only* role in today’s world is reveal Truths to humans—so that, e.g., so-called “acts of God” are not such, and that the very concept of “acts of God” is blasphemous.

⁹⁷See, e.g., John 14:26 and 15:26.

14. One's "natural high" may be interpreted as "indwelling"—even "possession"—by God as Holy Spirit. Which may cause one to believe that when Paul was writing about being filled with the Holy Spirit, he was referring to what some would call a "natural high" experience. Note that in this case one is thinking of God not as a discrete, transcendent Being, but as an amorphous "ghostly" something that can be present in humans. What we have here is a "God as Presence" concept of God, a God that is *experienced* rather than a God that *does*, or has done, things (e.g., create things). Given the latter, a person who has come to conceive God as Presence is unlikely to think of God as, e.g., a *creator* of things, and is therefore likely to think of the current controversy involving the teaching of evolution as sadly misguided. That those who argue for Creationism/Intelligent Design are spiritually immature individuals whose thinking about spiritual matters utterly lacks depth.⁹⁸
15. If one comes to perceive spirit in all (or many) things (point 9), one may (but need not) equate that spirit with Deity—so that one comes to think of Deity in terms of *immanence*. That is, one comes to think of Deity as an all-pervasive Something that "inhabits" all things. One developing such a view would not only come to have *respect* for all things, but *reverence*. And if one not merely has respect for things, but reverence, one will be even less likely to engage in harmful behavior toward them. And if one *must* kill other living things to sustain oneself, one may feel that one must perform a ceremony first, and perhaps a ceremony afterward that expresses one's thanks. Because in this case one thinks of Deity as definitely other than a discrete, transcendent Being, one may come to conclude that any attempt to personify—or even name—Deity is blasphemous.

It is conceivable that a Fellowship participant could move into category 13, or 14, or 15. For that matter, a participant could move into categories 13 and 14, *or* 13 and 15, *or* 14 and 15—*or* even 13, 14, *and* 15. There are several possibilities here. Especially if one moves into all three categories does it become possible for one to come to believe—paradoxically—that Deity is both knowable and unknowable at the same time! This is not, note, a conclusion that one can reach in "ordinary consciousness" using common sense. It is the sort of conclusion that one can reach only if one has had certain experiences.

Despite the fact that participation in a Fellowship likely will expand one's *concept* of God, I believe that participants will also come to *feel* close to Deity. The experience of being a participant in a Fellowship will, that is, make Deity come alive for them—rather than remaining a mere intellectual abstraction. Michael Novak once remarked that most of the people he lived among are unaware of God—and then went on to assert that the reason was that the "key experiences through which God becomes real to people are, in our society, systematically

⁹⁸Of relevance here is John F. Haught, *Deeper Than Darwin: The Prospect for Religion in the Age of Evolution*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003.

blocked”⁹⁹ Although I would not go so far as to claim that *only* by participating in a New Word Fellowship can one experience Deity in our society,¹⁰⁰ I *would* assert that such participation would be spiritually fruitful for most, if not all, participants. It is undoubtedly true that “Rarely do we find a ski lift just waiting to transport us to our mountaintop experience.”¹⁰¹ A New Word Fellowship, however, is close to being a ski lift, I’m convinced!

I would even go so far as to say that participation in a Fellowship can have “salvific” implications, and not just for the various individuals participating in the Fellowship. If New Word Fellowships involve enough people in our society, this could have salvific implications for the human species—in that ideas may “come” to participants which, when acted upon, have highly significant consequences relative to humankind’s survival. This latter point is significant in that humankind’s very existence is currently being threatened by “global warming,” among other factors.¹⁰²

Those familiar with feminist theological/religious literature will know that that literature emphasizes experience. For example, theologian Sheila D. Collins has noted (in discussing Mary Daly) that a “group of women at a Grailville theology conference,” in writing down words “which expressed for them a sense of the meaning of God in their lives,” wrote such words as energizing, empowering, grounding, being, creating, etc.¹⁰³ In other words, they thought of God in *verb* terms rather than *noun* terms. Thus, my discussion here of the New Word Fellowship may resonate with women more than men (who, I believe, tend to think of Deity as a person-like

⁹⁹“The Unawareness of God,” in *The God Experience*, edited by Joseph P. Whelan, S.J. New York: Newman Press, 1971, pp. 6, 8.

¹⁰⁰L. Robert Keck has introduced “meditative prayer” as an alternate “path to the Spirit.” See his *The Spirit of Synergy: God’s Power and You*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1978. Also, Matthew Fox (*op. cit.*), in his Chapter 7 (“Creation Spirituality and the Dreamtime”), refers (p. 125) to “the consciousness breakthrough that the sweat lodge is all about,” and (p. 126) hitting the wall in running. Drumming is another means to an altered state of consciousness that might be mentioned.

¹⁰¹Marraine C. Kettell, “Becoming Ourselves,” a sermon delivered at Old South Church, Boston, Massachusetts, February 26, 2006, p. 4.

¹⁰²See, e.g., Tom Flannery, *The Weather Makers: How Man is Changing the Climate and What it Means for Life on Earth*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005. On p. 183 Flannery observes that it is entirely possible that before this century is over, 60% of all species now existing will be extinct! Given this possibility, our well-being as humans will be severely affected. Indeed, there is no guarantee that we humans will not be among the 60%.

¹⁰³*A Different Heaven and Earth*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974, p. 218.

being—i.e., in *noun* terms). However, it seems to me that *both* men and women have narrow concepts of God, and that participation in a New Word Fellowship would help both develop a more sophisticated (if amorphous) concept of God.

It should go without saying that participation in a Fellowship would place one squarely in the Judeo-Christian tradition. George E. Tinker has noted that the imperative *metanoite*, usually translated as “repent,” is better translated as “return to God”—i.e., “recognize the divine hegemony, . . . return to the ideal relationship between Creator and the created.”¹⁰⁴ Insofar as the key personages in the Judeo-Christian tradition have striven not only to themselves establish a close relationship with Deity, but help their fellows develop a closer relationship with Deity (and in a multi-faceted way), the New Word Fellowship is clearly in that Grand Tradition (unlike Christianity!).

Note, though, that a complex concept of “God” is associated with the New Word Fellowship (and in that respect is not unlike the Christian Bible!).¹⁰⁵ In some contexts (i.e., when one senses that one has received a revelation), one may conceive “God” as a discrete, transcendent Being. In other contexts (i.e., when one is experiencing a natural high), one may not so much *think* about what “God” is like, but *experience* “God” as a Presence (which one, like Paul of Tarsus, may refer to as constituting indwelling by the Holy Spirit). And in still other contexts (i.e., when one perceives Spirit in other people and/or things), one may think of “God” as an amorphous Something that is immanent (if one invokes the God-concept at all, that is). This latter God-concept is usually given the label “pantheism;” note, however, that it is given that label by those who not only conceive God as a discrete, transcendent Being, but tacitly assume that that’s the only way “God” *can* be conceived. By, that is, narrow-minded people who, because *they* think that way, find it easy to condemn those who *don’t* think their way as atheists, and treat them as if they had never heard of the “love of neighbor” command.

From the above discussion it should be clear that those who have for some time participated in a New Word Fellowship likely would not apply the label “panentheists” to themselves. For they are likely to regard this label that as a mere intellectual construct, one created by people who ostensibly would like to “think outside the box” imposed by their transcendent view of “God” but, in not having *experienced* anything that might be labeled Deity, are unable to escape their

¹⁰⁴“Creation as Kin: An American Indian View,” in *After Nature’s Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 151.

¹⁰⁵I should perhaps note that Jack Miles has discovered 24 different concepts of (or at least *roles* for) God in the Hebrew Bible (i.e., our “Old Testament”). See his *God: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

intellectual box.

Earlier, I introduced a graphic figure and stated that it was the “B” concept of worship that was Biblical rather than (the more conventional) “A” concept; that, in fact, the “A” concept should be thought of as not simply different from the “B” concept, but its *inverse*—its exact opposite. At this point, however, let me qualify the earlier statement by noting that although the New Word Fellowship, as an institution, on the one hand reject—and utterly—the Servant concept of “God,” this does not mean that it embraces, rather, the Master concept. As I have emphasized in this section, the Fellowship participant likely associates different concepts of Deity with different contexts. Potentially three different concepts, in fact. One might say, therefore, that Fellowship participants (some of them, at any rate) would be trinitarians, but in an unconventional way¹⁰⁶--one that actually has some *meaning* for them!

¹⁰⁶For an example of the level of inanity to which conventional discussions of the trinity can descend, see Adelle Banks (of Religion News Service), “In Gender Debate, Jesus is ‘Subordinate,’” *Christian Century*, Vol. 124, no. 4 (February 20, 2007), pp. 12 - 13.

IV. Final Thoughts

My discussion of the New Word Fellowship has, it will be noticed, focused solely on the Fellowship as a discussion group, which suggests the question: Would meetings (“services”) of participants in a Fellowship consist just of discussions? And my answer is that although discussions (following the procedures outline above) would be the heart of meetings, NeWFian services might very well include much more than that: it is up to participants in a given NeWFian group to decide for themselves what (if anything) should take place during services besides discussions.

It is certainly possible, for example, that members of a given such group would engage in certain collective activities prior to discussion sessions. (Recall that any given discussion group would contain about 12 people, so that if a given NeWFian group had, say, 144 members, and all members were present on a given meeting day, those members would divide into 12 Fellowships that day.) For example, a period might be devoted to announcements, another to music (but instrumental music only, as I stated earlier), another to readings, still others to rituals developed by and for that group, etc. And after discussion sessions had concluded, there might be a period for socializing, with refreshments. While activities were going on for the adults there would be infant/child care, and some sort of educational program for school-age children. Again, I am simply trying to be suggestive here; any given NeWFian “congregation” would make its own decisions as to the nature of its “services.”

This fact of “congregational” autonomy does not mean that different NeWFian groups in the same area might not maintain contact one with another to share ideas, etc.—that, in fact, a “denomination” of sorts might not even develop. That, i.e., an umbrella organization might be formed that would, e.g., serve as a resource center for a group of NeWFian congregations—with a “bureaucracy” becoming attached to such a center. A control hierarchy would not, however, develop, given that members of any given congregation would prize diversity, and lack a pathological need to dictate to others how to think and act.

The fact that those attracted to NeWFism would, of necessity, be people who welcomed diversity in the others with whom they had contact (and that participation in Fellowships would itself help people become tolerant) does not mean that conflicts would never arise in a given NeWFian congregation. I would hope, however, that members of any given congregation would be able to deal well with internal conflict, and in most cases be able to resolve whatever problems had arisen. The fact of the matter, however, is that people differ in intelligence, in the degree to which they are mentally ill, in their experiences, etc., so that cases will arise where resolution of

conflicts is not possible. In that case what I hope would happen is that a member who does not “fit in” would not simply leave the Fellowship, but leave it and form another congregation. For there can't be too many NeWFian congregations!

But will NeWFism be able to compete in the current “religious market” wherein the megachurches seem to be the “fittest” churches around? In answering this question, let me begin by noting that several decades ago sociologist Philip E. Slater suggested that there are “three human desires that are deeply and uniquely frustrated by American culture:

- (1) The desire for *community*—the wish to live in trust and fraternal cooperation with one's fellows in a total and visible collective entity.
- (2) The desire for *engagement*—the wish to come directly to grips with social and interpersonal problems and to confront on equal terms an environment which is not composed of ego-extensions.
- (3) The desire for *dependence*—the wish to share responsibility for the control of one's impulses and the direction of one's life.”¹⁰⁷

I'm not so sure that I agree with Slater's third “desire,” but would add to his list that many in our society recognize that they have certain talents, would like to develop those talents, but also feel the pressures of “career”—and are therefore forced to suppress such a desire. I believe that the success of the megachurches has little to do with the “conservative” theology that they expound, and much to do with the fact that they recognize (if but implicitly) that there are unmet desires “out there” (especially in suburbia), and have designed programs designed to “minister” to those unmet desires. In fact, some of those who have initiated megachurches have consciously used marketing techniques—as if they were selling cereal, not Jesus! Indeed, as one who has been inspired by the Grand Tradition implicit in the (Christian) Bible, I have difficulty perceiving just how these megachurches relate to that Grand Tradition!

I have no difficulty in seeing NeWFian congregations as a part of that Tradition, however. More pertinent for the present topic of “success,” however, is the fact that I believe that NeWFism can address well the needs and desires of the contemporary USan (i.e., citizen of the United States). One must, of course, have a sincere interest in spiritual matters to become a Fellowship participant (a quality that may be lacking in many of those attracted to megachurches). And one must have the mental flexibility to be able to “think outside the box,” so far as one's ideas of “proper” services are concerned. Having studied the phenomenon of the diffusion of

¹⁰⁷*The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970, p. 5. I am in awe of the brilliance of this book.

innovations, I know that the early stages of development are likely to involve “slow going” for any “NeWFian movement.” However, once such a movement would achieve a certain “critical mass,” there is the potential that it would begin to “take off,” and become a significant force within U.S. society (among other societies).

The final point I would like to make is that I do not expect participants in Fellowships to just engage in talking. Rather, I expect varying sorts of activities (“outreach” and other) to occur on the part of NeWFians, each congregation making its own decisions on this matter—and with a “central office” (if one is established) acting as a resource.¹⁰⁸ For given that the “love of neighbor” command would be a central one for NeWFians, of necessity would members be “activists.” In fact the motto of any particular Fellowship should be: “Yes, I *am* my brother’s keeper!”

Because of the potential benefits—individual and societal—that can result from participation in a New Word Fellowship, I am hopeful that some of those who become aware of the proposal advanced herein will find it not only attractive, but compellingly so; and because they are also in substantial agreement with the Biblical basis that I provide for the proposal, feel “led” to “pick up the ball, and go with it.” That would not only make me happy; doing so by a number of people—and soon—might very well be the key to humankind’s “salvation”¹⁰⁹ from the threat of global ecocatastrophe. For humans would thereby be partnering with God—and as has been said (Matthew 19:26), with God, all things are possible.

¹⁰⁸For example, I would hope that NeWFians would recognize that our society must—and beginning yesterday!—move decidedly in a “green” direction, and would begin acting on that belief. See, e.g., Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.

¹⁰⁹The term “salvation” is usually used in conjunction with the afterlife. Here, however, I use the term in a more Biblical (i.e., here-and-now) sense, e.g., as it is used in the book of Psalms. For example, in Psalms 22 (which begins “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”) we find (vs. 19, 20): “Oh LORD, don’t stay away from me! Come quickly to my rescue! Save me from the sword; save my life from these dogs.” The salvation needed when that Psalm was written was from the wrath of enemies; today, our enemy is global warming.

APPENDIX

Group Formation

The Bishop is in charge of group formation. The chart below indicates how this would be done, depending on the number of participants on any given day. The first column indicates the number of participants present (exclusive of the Bishop), the other columns the number in each group that is formed that day. The first person chosen for a given group is the group's Prophet for the day. After all groups have been formed, the Bishop joins the last group.

No.	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
1	1				
2	2				
3	3				
4	4				
5	5				
6	6				
7	7				
8	8				
9	9				
10	10				
11	11				
12	12				
13	13				
14	14				
15	15				
16	8	8			
17	9	8			
18	9	9			
19	10	9			
20	10	10			
21	11	10			
22	11	11			
23	12	11			
24	8	8	8		
25	9	8	8		
26	9	9	8		
27	9	9	9		
28	10	9	9		
29	10	10	9		
30	10	10	10		
31	11	10	10		

32	11	11	10		
33	11	11	11		
34	12	12	12		
35	13	12	12		
36	9	9	9	9	
37	10	9	9	9	
38	10	10	9	9	
39	10	10	10	9	
40	10	10	10	10	
41	11	10	10	10	
42	11	11	10	10	
43	11	11	11	10	
44	11	11	11	11	
45	12	11	11	11	
46	12	12	11	11	
47	12	12	12	11	
48	12	12	12	12	
49	10	10	10	10	9
50	10	10	10	10	10

Etc.